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GRANT'S 1864 CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA

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A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

TIMOTHY C. MCNEIL, MAJ, USA  
B.G.S., University of Michigan, 1973

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas  
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19. ABSTRACT (Continued)

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement).

## ABSTRACT

GRANT'S 1864 CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA, by Major Timothy C. McNeill, USA, 154 pages.

This study is an historical analysis of General Ulysses S. Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia. It begins with Grant's appointment as Lieutenant General and General in Chief of all the Union armies on 9 March 1864, and concludes with the defeat of the flanking movement against the Weldon Railroad below Petersburg on 22 June 1864. Grant's strategy and preparations for the spring campaign, and the subsequent operations of the Army of the Potomac are described and analyzed.

Among the conclusions which can be drawn from this study was that despite the extraordinarily difficult military and geographical challenges of conducting large scale offensive operations in Tidewater Virginia during the Civil War, Grant came close to achieving a decisive strategic victory that could have ended the war in the summer of 1864. He failed to establish a fully effective system of command relationships. He assigned Richmond rather than Petersburg as the objective for Butler's Army of the James. He accepted battle in the Wilderness under circumstances unfavorable to his army. He sent Sheridan's entire Cavalry Corps on a deep raid and away from the critical fighting at Spotsylvania. He failed to exploit the potential of Hancock's initial flanking movement at Spotsylvania. He pulled the XVIII Corps away from the Army of the James at a critical time to throw it against Confederate entrenchments at Cold Harbor. He launched pointless assaults at Cold Harbor without benefit of proper reconnaissance or coordination, wasting thousands of lives. He failed to take Petersburg after crossing the James River at a time when it was virtually defenseless. And he initially lacked a full understanding of the defensive strength of entrenched soldiers armed with the rifled musket, and of the proper role of cavalry. The faulty system of command relationships established by Grant was a critical factor that caused or compounded many of these errors. While Grant did not achieve a decisive strategic victory, his accomplishments at the operational level did lock the Confederacy into a position that virtually ensured its ultimate defeat, and the restoration of the Union.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an historical analysis of General Ulysses S. Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia. In May 1864, Grant moved overland toward Richmond with the Union Army of the Potomac. Grant intended to fix, defeat, and--if possible--destroy General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in the field outside of the Richmond fortifications.<sup>1</sup> A decisive defeat of the Confederacy's most powerful army led by its most able general would end the rebellion and restore the unity of the young republic. The paper describes the operations of the campaign, analyzes its successes and failures, and develops conclusions about whether weaknesses in Grant's system of command relationships prevented the Union from achieving a decisive strategic victory that would have ended the Civil War in the summer of 1864.

This campaign of the Civil War holds some particular interest for study by officers in the modern era. As John C. Ropes said in a paper which he read before the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts on 19 May 1884:

"The campaign of 1864 in Virginia has a character altogether its own. It stands out among the other campaigns of the war with a sort of terrible impressiveness. Its resoluteness, its unconquerable obstinacy, its persistent hopefulness, its heroic quality, command our admiration. But its terribly bloody battles, its encounters of every day,



aimless, desperate, and sanguinary, the noble trees cut down by musket bullets, the horrible thickets where the veterans of North and South struggled in blind and deadly combat, the thousands upon thousands of brave men slain and maimed, and, above all, the indecisive results, amaze, terrify, repel, dishearten us."<sup>2</sup>

In many respects, this was the first truly modern campaign fought by the U.S. Army. The continuous, uninterrupted combat that began with the Army of the Potomac's crossing of the Rapidan River on 4 May 1864 was a significant departure from the previous tempo and intensity of combat in the Civil War. From 1861 to 1863, the Civil War was characterized by occasional major battles lasting from one to three days, followed by long periods of inactivity. During these periods of inactivity, the armies recovered from the shock of battle, and replenished depleted manpower and supplies. Grant's Overland Campaign radically changed the manner in which the Civil War was prosecuted by the Union, as he made a determined effort to bring the war to a successful conclusion in the shortest possible time. This prolonged period of continuous, uninterrupted conflict "foreshadowed the warfare of the next century",<sup>3</sup> and was of the intensity that the U.S. Army is anticipating in its AirLand Battle doctrine for the next war in Europe.

The successes and failures of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia may offer some useful insight for commanders in the modern era. The U.S. Army's "Active Defense" doctrine of the mid-1970s abandoned the traditional offensive orientation of our military operations in response to the

threat posed by a numerically superior Soviet Red Army to the free nations of Western Europe. When arrayed against the known Soviet doctrine of massive firepower, rapid maneuver, and aggressive exploitation of any discovered weaknesses in an unrestrained blitzkreig towards the English Channel, the "Active Defense" promised little more than the prospects of catastrophic defeat. The defense of Western Europe was left largely to the Strategic Air Command, in the minds of many serving officers. The U.S. Army's new doctrine of the AirLand Battle offers much better prospects for defeating a Soviet attack on the Central Front by gaining and maintaining the initiative through continuous, violent offensive operations, just as Grant did in his campaign. The degree to which logistical support requirements and politics dictated strategy options also gives modern overtones to this campaign. As General in Chief, Grant was faced with the challenge of establishing a modern system of command relationships for not only the Army of the Potomac, but for all the Union armies in both the Eastern and Western Theaters of War. By accompanying one of the major armies during the campaign, Grant placed considerable stress on his system of command relationships. The flaws that this stress revealed prevented him from achieving a decisive strategic victory that might have ended the Civil War in the summer of 1864. These factors make the study of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia particularly useful for modern era officers

organizing effective command relationships and preparing in peacetime for fighting on future battlefields.

The paper is limited in its scope in order that the undertaking might remain manageable. It focuses only on Grant and his campaign with the Army of the Potomac. The activities of the Army of the James under General Benjamin F. Butler, the Army of West Virginia under General Franz Sigel are covered in much less detail, and the armies in the west under Generals Nathaniel P. Banks and William T. Sherman are touched on only lightly in passing. While Grant's operations with the Army of the Potomac cannot be fully understood in total isolation from the activities of the coordinating armies, it would be impractical to expand the paper sufficiently to adequately cover all of them in any detail. The actual period examined begins on 9 March 1864, when Grant was appointed to the rank of Lieutenant General and assumed supreme command of the entire Union Army. The period examined ends on 22 June 1864, with the failure of the flanking movement against the Weldon and Southside Railroads at Petersburg. Thus, the period examined includes eight weeks of preparation, and seven weeks of combat operations. The nine months of siege warfare around Petersburg that followed the Overland Campaign, resulting in the final defeat of Confederate forces in the east, are not discussed. Finally, the campaign is analyzed only from the Union perspective. While, regrettably, much is necessarily left out of this

study, the project is still sufficiently ambitious, for this extended campaign was quite unlike any other that had come before. These limitations in scope give the paper enough focus to make it manageable.

The paper presents Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia in seven distinct parts. One part covers Grant's strategy and his *commander's intent*--how he envisioned the campaign developing--and the eight weeks of preparation prior to his crossing of the Rapidan River. The remaining six parts cover the maneuver and combat of the Army of the Potomac, grouping the actions into six operations. These operations are the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Sheridan's Cavalry Raid, North Anna, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. Such a grouping is somewhat artificial, as the combat throughout this period was almost continuous. However, historians have traditionally broken the campaign down into these or similar component parts, and it does serve to facilitate analysis of the campaign.

Each of the separate operations that together constitute the campaign are presented in a systematic manner. First, a description of the operation is provided, consisting of the battle and the maneuvers leading up to it. Secondly, the operation is analyzed for Grant's successes and failures and whether weaknesses in the Union system of command relationships contributed to those failures. The campaign is controversial, and the participants as well as historians sharply disagree in

their analysis. An overall analysis of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia is presented in the final chapter.

Chapter One includes coverage of the preparation phase, lasting from 9 March 1864 to 3 May 1864. During this period of time, Grant made a number of decisions regarding his strategy and the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac. Included within this part are discussions of Grant's decision to move overland, his designation of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia rather than Richmond as the objective, his selection of an axis of advance, his strategy of seizing and maintaining the initiative through continuous combat, his accommodation of the political factors influencing the campaign, his operational plan for the coordinating armies, his command arrangements, and Meade's reorganization of the Army of the Potomac. Grant's decisions during this period were to have a profound impact on the course of the coming campaign.

Chapter Two covers two separate operations during the period 4 May 1864 to 19 May 1864. The Wilderness Operation, lasting from 4 May 1864 to 7 May 1864, includes the Army of the Potomac's crossing of the Rapidan River and the bloody engagement fought over some of the worst imaginable terrain for organized combat. The Spotsylvania Operation, lasting from 8 May 1864 to 19 May 1864, begins with Grant's movement around Lee's right flank in an attempt to interpose his army between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond. It ends with the prolonged--and

even more terrible--struggle over the Confederate field fortifications around Spotsylvania Court House. Together, these two operations constitute the first half of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia.

Chapter Three covers four separate operations during the period 9 May 1864 to 22 June 1864. Sheridan's Cavalry Raid Operation, lasting from 9 May 1864 to 24 May 1864, was a deep operation in the Confederate rear by the entire Union Cavalry Corps. Most of this operation occurred at the same time as the Spotsylvania Operation, and the remainder took place during the North Anna Operation that followed. The North Anna Operation, lasting from 20 May 1864 to 26 May 1864, includes Grant's movement out of the Spotsylvania positions, across the Mattaponi River, and around Lee's right flank to probe new Confederate field fortifications across the North Anna River. The Cold Harbor Operation, lasting from 26 May 1864 to 12 June 1864, opens with Grant's movement from the North Anna around Lee's right flank across the Pamunkey River to Totopotomoy Creek. It continues with his movement again around Lee's right flank across Totopotomoy Creek to Cold Harbor. It ends with the decisive repulse of a major Union assault against strong Confederate positions, and the resulting positional warfare. The Petersburg Operation, lasting from 12-22 June 1864, includes Grant's covert withdrawal from the trenches at Cold Harbor, his crossing of the James River, and the initial assaults against the Petersburg

fortifications. Together, these four operations constitute the second part of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia.

Chapter Four provides an overall analysis of the Overland Campaign, and answers the thesis question, "Did weaknesses in Grant's system of command relationships prevent the Union from achieving a decisive strategic victory that would have ended the Civil War in the summer of 1864?".

#### END NOTES

1. Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1952), p. 375.

2. John C. Ropes, Grant's Campaign in Virginia in 1864, Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1905), Vol. 4: The Wilderness Campaign: May-June 1864, p. 365.

3. Lynn Montross, War Through the Ages (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 622.

## CHAPTER ONE

On 9 March 1864, President Abraham Lincoln presented Ulysses S. Grant with his commission in the newly authorized grade of Lieutenant General, and appointed him as General in Chief of all the Union armies.<sup>1</sup> President Lincoln had thereby entrusted the 533,000 Union soldiers serving in seventeen major commands<sup>2</sup> to his fighting general who had won victories at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. He charged Grant with the responsibility of using those half million soldiers to crush the rebellion by force of arms, and bring the Civil War to a final victorious conclusion.

President Lincoln had been frustrated with the progress of the war in the Eastern Theater. While Grant was winning victory after victory for him in the west, a succession of generals in the east had presented him with a series of defeats as well as two unexploited victories. Despite the greatly superior numbers, artillery, and material support enjoyed by the Union, the forces of the Confederacy had consistently dominated the battlefields in the east. General Irvin McDowell lost at Bull Run in July 1861. Generals Nathaniel P. Banks and John C. Fremont were defeated in the Valley Campaign in May and June 1862. General George B. McClellan was defeated in the Seven Days'



Battles in June and July 1862. General John Pope lost the Second Battle of Bull Run in August 1862. General McClellan won a narrow victory at Antietam in September 1862, but failed to properly exploit his opportunity for a decisive victory. General Ambrose E. Burnside lost the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. General Joseph Hooker was defeated at Chancellorsville in May 1863. General George G. Meade won a victory at Gettysburg in July 1863, but, like McClellan at Antietam, he failed to exploit his opportunity to destroy the Confederate army. President Lincoln had mobilized the resources of the nation to give his commanders the tools necessary for victory, but their weak generalship and the prowess of Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had combined to deny the Union forces victory. Now, with Ulysses S. Grant, things would be different:

"After four [sic] years of fruitless searching, Abraham Lincoln had at last found his general; a man of single purpose and ruthless driving energy who would ignore politics and concentrate upon destroying the Confederate Army."<sup>3</sup>

In the Western Theater, Union armies had achieved far greater results than in the east. Inspired Union leadership and naval superiority on the great rivers of the west enabled them to make significant advances into the Confederacy. Grant's Vicksburg Campaign--considered by many to be "the most brilliant ever fought on American soil"<sup>4</sup>--captured the last significant Confederate bastion on the Mississippi River, and had eliminated an entire army. With

the capture of Vicksburg and Port Hudson, the Mississippi River had been cleared from Cairo to New Orleans, thus dividing the Confederacy into two distinct parts. With the seizure of Knoxville and Chattanooga, the major Confederate rail link between the Eastern and Western Theaters had been severed. Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee had been generally cleared of major Confederate forces. In March 1864, the two primary armies stood facing each other in Northwestern Georgia, within a hundred miles of Atlanta.

Grant made a number of key decisions that combined to shape and define his overall strategy for the campaign, and to prepare the Army of the Potomac to carry out that strategy. Grant decided to move overland, rather than executing an amphibious movement to the James River near Richmond, as McClellan had done in 1862.<sup>5</sup> He designated Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as the primary objective instead of Richmond,<sup>6</sup> as previous Union commanders had done. He selected an axis of advance around Lee's right flank, and planned to seize and maintain the initiative through continuous combat. Grant made his decisions with an awareness of the political factors influencing the campaign, particularly with regard to the retention of politically influential generals, at least until the November 1864 elections. His campaign plan for the coordinating armies was to implement General Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. In letters to his three principal subordinate commanders, Grant described his intention to

have all the Union armies conducting offensive operations at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Grant took a number of steps to reorganize and prepare the Army of the Potomac for the grim campaign he was about to wage. These steps included approval of Meade's plan for the consolidation of the infantry corps, the establishment of a cavalry corps, the raising of additional manpower from the rear for service in the field, and the streamlining of the logistical support. Grant organized his personal staff and established the command relationship arrangements for the Army of the Potomac as well as his measures for exercising strategic control over the entire Union war effort. Grant's operational plan for the campaign is discussed below, along with each of these individual decisions he made during the eight weeks of preparation prior to crossing the Rapidan River.

Grant's decision to conduct an overland campaign, rather than an amphibious movement near Richmond, was closely related to the objective he selected for his army in the Eastern Theater. His intent was for the Army of the Potomac to focus on Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as the objective. Grant stated that, "I shall not give my attention so much to Richmond as to Lee's army, and I want all commanders to feel that hostile armies, and not cities are to be their objective points."<sup>8</sup> This represented a change in the previous Union thinking which had always considered the capture of Richmond as the primary

objective. Richmond did, however, still play a role as a supporting objective:<sup>9</sup>

"It was necessary to move toward it, to threaten it, to compel the Confederacy to spend its lifeblood in defense of it--and if, at last, the city could in fact be taken, that would be well and good; but for the Army of the Potomac the only objective that now had any real meaning was the opposing Army of Northern Virginia."<sup>10</sup>

In order to destroy the Confederate army, Grant felt that it was important to fight Lee's army outside of the Richmond fortifications, because he considered that those fortifications would greatly enhance the strength of the defenders.<sup>11</sup> The farther away from his base of operations at Richmond that Lee could be induced to fight, the more likely Grant was to actually be able to destroy his army.<sup>12</sup> The selection of an overland campaign, therefore, was closely related to Grant's primary objective of destroying the Army of Northern Virginia.

There was another factor bearing on Grant's decision to choose an overland campaign. The government's sensitivity to the security of Washington required that substantial field forces be positioned so as to prevent any sudden Confederate thrust towards the capital.<sup>13</sup> J.F.C. Fuller identified this threatening of Washington as one of the key components of the Confederate strategy:

"Whenever hard-pressed, as in 1862 and 1863, the Confederate armies had used it [the Shenandoah Valley] in order to threaten Washington, and so compel the North to assume the defensive. It was the direct line of political attack, and the frequent advances down it, more than any other factor in Confederate strategy, that had prolonged

the war; and be it remembered, the only hope left to the South of gaining their independence, <sup>14</sup> was to prolong it, and so weary out the North."

By moving overland, Grant was able to meet the security requirements of Washington without having to detach a large portion of the Army of the Potomac to protect it, as would have been required if Grant had elected for a repeat of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. In essence, the Army of the Potomac would serve as the "principal garrison for the protection of Washington even while it was moving on Lee."<sup>15</sup>

Once he had made the decision to strike overland, Grant had to choose an axis of advance. There were two basic choices available. The first option was to move around Lee's left flank along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad towards Charlottesville. This option had the advantage of permitting the army to fight in relatively open ground. It carried with it the disadvantage of a vulnerable, and ever lengthening supply line that would have required the detachment of thousands of troops to secure.<sup>16</sup> Grant rejected this option because "all that was done would have to be done with the supplies and ammunition we started with", and the Army of the Potomac simply could not carry enough supplies to make this practical, particularly with this part of the country being exhausted of all food and forage.<sup>17</sup> The second option was to move around Lee's right flank. Grant saw this option as having the advantage of using the Union naval superiority in the

Potomac, Chesapeake Bay, and tributaries to assure a protected line of supply to locations within easy hauling distance of the army all along its axis of advance.<sup>18</sup> Basing his movement on protected sea lines of communications also had the advantage of permitting the rapid evacuation of wounded soldiers to hospitals in Washington.<sup>19</sup> Grant was concerned with the care of his wounded, and movement on this axis offered them the best chance for survival. The disadvantages of this option were the restricted terrain and the formidable system of transverse river barriers of Tidewater Virginia. Grant elected to accept these disadvantages and move on an axis of advance around Lee's right flank:

"Strategically and logistically, Grant made the right choice, but from the tactical point of view his decision was to prove an extremely expensive one, for it resulted in the Army of the Potomac being led to slaughter <sup>in</sup> the labyrinthine thickets of the Wilderness."<sup>20</sup>

Grant's strategy was to seize and maintain the initiative in his campaign by continuous offensive combat operations. The previous pattern of short battles followed by long periods of inactivity was to be shattered in this first of the truly modern campaigns fought by the U.S. Army. This strategy was in keeping with Grant's simple theory of war:

"The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you <sup>can</sup> <sup>21</sup> can and as often as you can, and keep moving on."

Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had dominated the Eastern Theater through the early years of the war. Despite its numerical inferiority, it had demonstrated the capability to execute sudden, rapid, and audacious maneuvers in response to the moves of the Union armies. Such maneuvers had time and again allowed Lee to regain the battlefield initiative. Grant intended to fix Lee with continuous offensive maneuver and attack, and deny him the ability to launch such counterstrokes during the campaign.<sup>22</sup> He would mass his numerically superior forces and use them to hammer continuously at the enemy until he destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia, or else wore it down through attrition.<sup>23</sup>

Political influences were evident to Grant as he made his plans for the campaign. War weariness in the Northern States was growing steadily, and Lincoln faced uncertain prospects in the November 1864 election. The pressure was on Grant to bring the war to a speedy conclusion. If the war could not be won prior to the election, then at least sufficient progress towards that goal had to be made to convince the electorate that victory was inevitable, lest a peace candidate win the election and accept a war settlement recognizing the secession of the Confederacy.<sup>24</sup> This "moral dry rot" and concerns about the election dictated an offensive strategy to crush the rebellion as rapidly as possible, and led to politics dominating strategy just as topography dominated tactics.<sup>25</sup>

The influence of politics was also evident in some of the key subordinate commanders Grant was forced to accept in positions of command in the coordinating armies. General Benjamin F. Butler, commanding the Army of the James, won his appointment because of his importance as a Massachusetts Democrat.<sup>26</sup> General Nathaniel P. Banks, commanding the Union forces in Louisiana, was also an important Massachusetts politician.<sup>27</sup> General Franz Sigel, commanding the Army of West Virginia, had been appointed in consideration of the German vote. These three officers occupied key positions of independent command, but demonstrated limited military ability. However, they could not be dismissed without risking the loss of political support for the administration until they committed "especially egregious blunders" in the field. Recognizing Butler's lack of military training and combat experience, Grant assigned General William F. Smith to the Army of the James to provide an experienced combat veteran to advise him.<sup>28</sup> His choice of Smith proved to be a serious error, for Smith's dismal performance in the Bermuda Hundred Operation and at Petersburg were extremely damaging to the Union cause. The other corps commander Grant provided Butler with was General Quincy A. Gillmore. The lamentable Gillmore was probably even worse than Smith, although he played a much less central role in Grant's campaign. This portion of Grant's system of command



relationships was certainly workable, but only with a better choice of personnel.

While Grant focused most of his effort on preparing the Army of the Potomac for the upcoming campaign, he also developed a strategy for the other major Union armies in the field. The problem in the three previous years was that all of the Union armies had operated without harmony in an independent manner.<sup>29</sup> Grant likened these uncoordinated efforts to, "a balky team, no two ever pulling together."<sup>30</sup> The Confederacy could respond to these individual threats by the timely shifting of forces over great distances. Grant implemented an operational plan, where pressure was to be applied everywhere at the same time by all the Union forces operating in concert.<sup>31</sup>

As the 119,000 man Army of the Potomac engaged the Army of Northern Virginia, it would be supported by two much smaller armies on its flanks. Butler's 40,000 man Army of the James was to move from Fortress Monroe to seize or threaten Richmond and interdict the railroad net south of Petersburg.<sup>32</sup> Grant's intent was to have Butler join him and operate against Lee at Richmond, and until that time to have Butler disrupt Confederate supply lines and tie down forces that might otherwise be sent to reinforce Lee. Although Grant listed Petersburg as one of Butler's objectives in his memoirs, nowhere in Grant's written communications with Butler did he assign Petersburg as an objective for the Army of the James.<sup>33</sup> Sigel's 32,000 man

Army of West Virginia was to move down the Shenandoah Valley and engage Confederate forces there.<sup>34</sup> Grant did not expect much from Sigel's operation, and intended it primarily to prevent those forces from reinforcing Lee.<sup>35</sup> It was also important to block sudden thrusts up the Shenandoah Valley in any further attempts by the Confederacy to regain the initiative by once again threatening Washington. Grant's intent was for these three armies to operate in harmony to facilitate the defeat or destruction of the *Army of Northern Virginia*.

Grant gave General William T. Sherman his instructions for operations in the west in a 4 April 1864 letter. Sherman was instructed to move against and defeat General Joseph E. Johnston's *Army of Tennessee*, which was shielding Atlanta, and move into the interior of the Confederacy to destroy its war resources. Grant's trust and confidence in Sherman was evident in the broad latitude he was given:

"I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of Campaign but simply to lay down the work it is desirable to have done, and leave you free to execute in your own way."<sup>36</sup>

Grant cautioned Sherman as to the need to prevent the Confederacy from uniting the armies of Lee and Johnston to concentrate against one of the Union armies to defeat it in detail.<sup>37</sup> Sherman commanded three Union armies in Northern Georgia; General John M. Schofield's 13,500 man *Army of the Ohio*, General James B. McPherson's 24,000 man *Army of the*

Tennessee, and General George H. Thomas' 61,000 man Army of the Cumberland. This powerful striking force, under his most aggressive subordinate, was intended to play perhaps the central role in the upcoming campaign:

"Though Grant naturally hoped that he would be able to crush Lee north of Richmond, it must not be overlooked, as most historians have overlooked it, that this was not his central idea, which was to hold Lee, as it were in a vice, by constant attack, until Sherman could swing round from Chattanooga and not only attack Lee's source of supply--his rear--but telescope the Confederacy, now virtually reduced to Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia, and crush it out of existence."<sup>38</sup>

Also in the west was Banks' 30,000 man force of the Department of the Gulf in Louisiana, which President Lincoln had ordered to invade Texas up the Red River to discourage any intervention from France.<sup>39</sup> After that campaign, Grant had hoped to leave minimal garrisons in the west, reinforce Banks with troops from Missouri, and deploy a 30,000 man force against Mobile, bringing pressure at yet another point of the Confederacy.<sup>40</sup>

The essence of Grant's plan was for all of the Union armies to make a concentric advance--primarily directed towards Richmond and Atlanta--and fix the enemy forces to their front to prevent the Confederacy from again shuttling troops from one theater to another as they had previously been able to do. Grant considered the Army of the Potomac as the center, the Army of the James as the left wing, the Army of West Virginia and Sherman's vast command in the west as the right wing, and the troops in the south to be a

force in the enemy's rear.<sup>41</sup> This was to mark the first time in the Civil War that all of the Union forces were to join the battle with a single, focused purpose, under the command of one man.

Grant placed most of his attention not on the coordinating armies, but rather on the preparation of the Army of the Potomac for the coming struggle with Lee. As Meade reorganized the infantry corps, Grant took actions to establish command relationships, organize a cavalry corps, raise additional manpower, and streamline the logistical support. Grant had only a few precious weeks to complete these preparations and familiarize himself with the Army of the Potomac prior to the start of his campaign.

On 23 March 1864, Meade implemented a reorganization of the infantry corps of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>42</sup> In 1863, the Army of the Potomac was organized in seven infantry corps; I, II, III, V, VI, XI and XII. It fought the Chancellorsville and Gettysburg Campaigns with the seven infantry corps averaging approximately 12,000 to 15,000 men each.<sup>43</sup> In late 1863, XI and XII Corps were sent to the west to help avert a potential Union disaster at Chattanooga. Meade felt that the five remaining corps still constituted an organization that stretched his span of control, and on 4 March he requested permission to dissolve I and III Corps, and merge their divisions into the remaining three corps.<sup>44</sup> Instead of beginning the campaign with five corps averaging 15,000 men each, he thus

had three corps averaging 25,000 men each. Changing the organizational structure from five corps to three would hopefully not only eliminate the span of control problem, but would increase the staying power of the corps in the heavy combat ahead.

This reorganization was not well received by the soldiers in the dissolved I and III Corps. In the Civil War, the corps was in many respects similar to the division of today. The soldiers wore corps patches, and identified with their corps in much the same manner as modern U.S. Army soldiers identify with their division. Each corps had its own history and identity, and the merging of the corps was a cause of dissatisfaction and loss of esprit de corps among the men, according to the Chief of Staff of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>45</sup> Meade felt that the reorganization, once it was implemented, met with "universal approbation".<sup>46</sup>

There was an additional Union formation that fought with the Army of the Potomac, IX Corps. Under Grant's system of command relationships, this 20,000 man corps was not technically part of the army. IX Corps was commanded by General Ambrose E. Burnside, who had previously commanded the entire Army of the Potomac during the disastrous Fredericksburg Campaign in December 1862. He had been demoted back to down to corps command after the slaughter at Marye's Heights. Burnside was considerably senior to Meade, who had served under Burnside as a division commander during the Fredericksburg Campaign. To

spare Burnside's feelings, Grant elected to hold IX Corps as a separate formation instead of incorporating it into the Army of the Potomac.<sup>47</sup> He initially used IX Corps as a strategic reserve, placing it at Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>48</sup> Positioned thusly, the corps posed the threat of yet another amphibious operation against the Confederate coast. Grant reversed his decision to hold Burnside on an equal command level with Meade within three weeks of his crossing of the Rapidan River, when he realized how cumbersome this arrangement actually proved to be.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to Meade's reorganization of the infantry corps, Grant reorganized the Army of the Potomac's cavalry. The cavalry had previously fought dispersed in small units of brigade and division size, primarily engaging in raids and in guarding lines of communication.<sup>50</sup> Cavalry in the east had never seemed to fully contribute to the fighting, as evidenced by the caustic observation, "I've never seen a dead cavalryman"--a line attributed to "Fighting Joe" Hooker. In his memoirs, Sheridan revealed that during his meeting with Lincoln prior to taking command of the Cavalry Corps, the President actually mentioned this line with reference to the Union cavalry in the Eastern Theater--presumably in jest.<sup>51</sup> Massed Confederate cavalry had dominated the Union cavalry in the east, and Grant decided to mass his cavalry as well for the coming campaign. He formed some 12,000 men into a unified corps of cavalry, and brought the aggressive

General Philip Sheridan from the Western Theater to command it.<sup>52</sup> When Sheridan took command, he found the condition of the horses to be poor, largely caused by the extended picket duty they had been performing for the Army of the Potomac. After some conflict with Meade, Sheridan was able to get his force relieved from much of this duty. The condition of his horses and the training status of his men began to show rapid improvement as a result of this action. Sheridan hoped to use his Cavalry Corps to defeat the Confederate cavalry, rather than engage in screening and security missions for the logistical trains.<sup>53</sup> In his memoirs, Sheridan discussed his differences with Meade over the proper employment of the cavalry:

"General Meade deemed cavalry fit for little more than guard and picket duty, and wanted to know what would protect the transportation trains and artillery reserve, cover the front of moving infantry columns, and secure his flanks from intrusion, if my policy were pursued. I told him that if he would let me use the cavalry as I contemplated, he need have little solicitude in these respects, for, with a mass of ten thousand mounted men, it was my belief that I could make it so lively for the enemy's cavalry that, so far as attacks from it were concerned, the flanks and rear of the Army of the Potomac would require little or no defense, and claimed, further, that moving columns of infantry should take care of their own fronts."<sup>54</sup>

These differences contributed to a major crisis in the high command of the Army of the Potomac within a few days of crossing the Rapidan River.

As Grant was preparing the Army of the Potomac, he took steps to increase its fighting strength. There were

two basic personnel problems facing Grant. Many regiments had enlisted for three years in 1861, and those enlistments were beginning to expire as the spring campaigning weather approached.<sup>55</sup> While a surprising number of soldiers actually reenlisted, there would be a steady stream of soldiers and some entire regiments that would be leaving the army as the campaign progressed. An overland campaign of continuous offensive combat against the Confederacy's finest army promised the likelihood of a lengthy casualty list. Grant cleared out the defenses of Washington to raise more strength for the field by converting heavy artillery units into infantry, and by sending forward some of the many garrison units scattered throughout the rear areas.<sup>56</sup> These moves were well-received by soldiers in the Army of the Potomac:

"One further thing Grant did, however, that went far toward making up for the unpopularity of those other changes that followed hard on his arrival. This was to reach into the back areas of the war, especially into the fortifications around the capital, and pluck thousands of easy living soldiers from their jobs for reassignment to duty in the field."<sup>57</sup>

This additional manpower that flowed into the army throughout the campaign was essential to keep the fighting strength of the Army of the Potomac at an acceptable level.

Logistics were to play a key role in Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia. An enormous amount of logistical support was required to sustain offensive operations in enemy territory. The Union Army calculated a requirement



to provide three pounds of rations and one pound of ammunition and other supplies every day for each man. The armies also required twenty-six pounds of forage for every horse, and twenty-three pounds for every mule each day.<sup>58</sup> Considering that the army possessed nearly 56,500 horses and mules, those forage requirements were a considerable burden.<sup>59</sup> The armies of the Civil War depended upon river transportation and railroads to move supplies to forward bases. Each of these modes of transportation had certain particular advantages. River transportation had great capacity at low cost, and was generally free from interdiction. Railroad transportation connected inland areas not serviced by major rivers, and they could be constructed as needed to support local operations when the army was stationary in one area.<sup>60</sup> Railroads were frequently the target of cavalry raids, and although damaged railroads could be rapidly repaired, these raids did frustrate a number of offensive operations throughout the war. Grant's selection of an axis of advance around Lee's right flank was dictated by logistical requirements:

"Realizing that command of the sea was the backbone of his strategy, and well aware that efficient strategy is based upon adequate supply, Grant decided to move Meade's army as close to the coast as possible, for though on account of the nature of the country this was tactically a disadvantage, strategically it was essential, as the sea coast would enable him to change his base of supply at will; further, no troops<sup>61</sup> would be required to protect this line of supply."

Without the river and railroad transportation, it would not have been possible to sustain the large Civil War armies, much less to support an offensive in enemy territory.

From the forward supply bases serviced by river or railroad transportation, the logistical support was moved up to the army in wagons. Grant was determined to reduce his wagon train by as much as possible in order that he might move the Army of the Potomac more rapidly.<sup>62</sup> He reduced the allowances for each brigade headquarters to two wagons for tents and baggage, one for subsistence and forage, and one for commissary sales for officers, as well as three wagons for hospital supplies. For each one thousand men, he allocated seven wagons to carry subsistence and forage, and three to carry ammunition. He allocated fifty wagons to carry forage for each cavalry division, three wagons for each artillery battery, and five wagons for each twenty-five wagons in the artillery ammunition train to carry forage and subsistence.<sup>63</sup> Despite Grant's attempts at reduction, the train was still huge, totalling more than 4,300 wagons and 835 ambulances, and requiring 20,000 men to handle the teams.<sup>64</sup> Grant recognized the enormous magnitude of the effort:

"There never was a corps better organized than was the quartermaster's corps with the Army of the Potomac in 1864. With a wagon-train that would have extended from the Rapidan to Richmond, stretched along in single file and separated as the teams necessarily would by when moving, we could still carry only three days' forage and about ten

to twelve days' rations, and besides a supply of ammunition."<sup>65</sup>

The most difficult link in the logistical support was always that of moving supplies forward by wagon train from these forward bases to the army, and this distance was reduced by forage requirements to sustain the animals hauling the supplies forward.<sup>66</sup> Logistics were destined to play a critical role in the campaign, strongly influencing strategy options and tactical operations.

The final aspect of preparation for Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia concerned the system of command relationships, not merely for the Army of the Potomac, but for all of the Union armies. As Lieutenant General, a Congress and President grateful for his victories in the west had given Grant seniority over every serving officer. As General in Chief, he had been given command over all of 533,000 soldiers of the Union Army, a responsibility that President Lincoln had previously had to perform himself. Now he had at last found an officer who would move aggressively and win battles in the field, and who would not try and override the political realities of fighting a divisive civil war with unrealistic military demands.<sup>67</sup>

Grant decided to accompany the Army of the Potomac in the coming campaign. Technically, Meade commanded the army and Grant merely located his headquarters with the army in the field. In their first meeting together, Meade had encouraged Grant to replace him in command of the Army

of the Potomac with Sherman or another general from the west, if Grant felt that that would enhance the cause. Deeply moved by an attitude that Grant considered unselfish and manly, he immediately decided to retain Meade in command.<sup>68</sup> By locating his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac, Grant removed himself from the politics of the capital and placed himself near the Union army facing the most dangerous enemy army. The command relationship was intended to relieve him of the burden of administering the army and supervising its tactical employment, while leaving himself sufficient time to plan strategy and manage the other theaters.<sup>69</sup> In a 13 April letter to his wife, Meade displayed initial optimism that this would be a workable arrangement, anticipating that he would exercise considerable control over the administration and movements of his army despite the presence of the General in Chief.<sup>70</sup> However, Grant's original command relationship concept for the Army of the Potomac and the actual reality that developed during the campaign were to prove to be quite different.

The final piece of the system of command relationships that characterized the Union Army was the position of Chief of Staff. General Henry W. Halleck, Grant's former superior in the west, assumed the position of Chief of Staff.<sup>71</sup> He served as a liaison between Grant and the President, as well with the commanders of the other Union armies. Halleck was a failure as a commander in the

field, but possessed an abundance of skill as an administrator. Grant passed his orders and reports through Halleck, and the arrangement relieved him of the complex duties of administering the Union Army as a whole. He was thus able to concentrate his efforts on defeating Lee in the east. The arrangement of President Lincoln as Commander in Chief, Grant as General in Chief, and Halleck as Chief of Staff gave the United States a modern system of command with which to prosecute the first truly modern war of the young nation's history.<sup>72</sup>

Grant completed his command arrangements with the establishment of a small personal staff. This staff consisted of only fourteen officers, and was actually similar in size to the staffs of many of the divisions in the Army of the Potomac.<sup>73</sup> Grant gave his personal staff specific guidance for how he intended to employ them in the coming campaign:

"I want you to discuss with me freely from time to time the details of the orders given for the conduct of a battle, and learn my views as fully as possible as to what course should be pursued in all the contingencies which may arise. I expect to send you to the critical points of the lines to keep me promptly advised of what is taking place, and in cases of great emergency, when new dispositions have to be made on the instant, or it becomes suddenly necessary to reinforce one command by sending to its aid troops from another, and there is not time to communicate with headquarters, I want you to explain my views to commanders, and urge immediate action, looking to cooperation, without waiting for specific orders from me."<sup>74</sup>

Grant's plan to use his personal staff to effectively transmit his commander's intent to his subordinates

promised to greatly increase his influence on the course of the campaign to follow, although there were instances where a lack of tactical control from the top cost the Army of the Potomac dearly during the campaign.

In summary, Grant took a number of important actions to prepare the Union armies and the Army of the Potomac for the 1864 campaign. He implemented an overall strategy that included efforts to fix and destroy the two principal Confederate armies in the field with major movements towards Richmond in the east and Atlanta in the west, and a move into the interior of the Confederacy to destroy its war resources. These were supported by coordinating armies on the James River, in the Shenandoah Valley, and in Louisiana. In the east, he decided to conduct an overland campaign along an axis of advance around the right flank of the Army of Northern Virginia, securing his lines of communication on the rivers of Tidewater Virginia and the sea. He intended to gain and maintain the initiative with aggressive offensive action and continuous combat to destroy Lee's army outside of the formidable Richmond fortifications. He recognized the political realities of war weariness in the North, and responded to the pressures for early success prior to the November 1864 elections that could bring a peace party to power--one that might be unwilling to pursue the Civil War to a victorious conclusion. He also responded to political pressures by retaining certain political generals in key

command positions prior to the election to strengthen President Lincoln's political position. He formed a unified corps of cavalry, reduced the logistical trains as much as possible, and established a coordinating relationship for Burnside's IX Corps. He raised additional manpower for the field by stripping troops from the defenses of Washington and other garrisons throughout the rear areas. He implemented a modern command system for the Union Army through which he hoped to successfully execute his position of General in Chief, while accompanying the Army of the Potomac in its death struggle with the Army of Northern Virginia. Finally, he organized a small personal staff to enable him to disseminate and implement his *commander's intent* throughout the Army of the Potomac during the course of its operations. Grant made these extensive preparations in the relatively short period of time between his appointment as Lieutenant General and General in Chief on 9 March 1864, and the crossing of the Rapidan River on 4 May 1864. The successes and failures of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia would prove to be, in many cases, a direct result of the quality of his preparations during this period.

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## CHAPTER TWO

In the early morning hours of 4 May 1864, the Army of the Potomac began its movement south across the Rapidan River on an axis of advance around the right flank of the Army of Northern Virginia, thus initiating Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia. On the same day, Butler's Army of the James began its amphibious movement to seize Bermuda Hundred and advance on Richmond, in accordance with Grant's order of 28 April.<sup>1</sup> The weeks of preparation and planning were over, and the two greatest armies of the Civil War would soon be engaged in a climactic struggle that could resolve the Civil War in the summer of 1864.

The terrain over which Grant committed the Army of the Potomac to fight its campaign was not conducive for offensive operations. The Rapidan River lay some sixty miles north of Richmond, and was one of a series of transverse barriers that characterize Tidewater Virginia. These rivers did not constitute arteries for invasion as did the great rivers of the west, but rather a succession of obstacles behind which Lee could entrench to enhance the defensive strength of his army.<sup>2</sup>

Across the Rapidan River lay a patch of some of the most difficult terrain in the Eastern Theater, called the Wilderness:

"The ground upon which the battle was fought was intersected in every direction by winding rivulets, rugged ravines, and ridges of mineral rock. Many excavations had been made in opening iron-ore beds, leaving pits bordered by ridges of earth. Trees had been felled in a number of places to furnish fuel and supply sawmills. The locality is well described by its name. It was a wilderness in every sense of the word."<sup>3</sup>

This was not the first time that the Army of the Potomac had entered the Wilderness, for it had met defeat there during the Chancellorsville Campaign exactly a year before. The Union soldiers had found that the thick undergrowth of small trees greatly restricted vision and the effective range of weapons, and made the movement of large troop formations difficult.<sup>4</sup>

Grant's movement across the Rapidan River into the Wilderness would become apparent to Lee at first light because of another significant terrain feature, that of Clark's Mountain. This was a steep hog-back ridge 1,082 feet above sea level,<sup>5</sup> rising some six to seven hundred feet above the surrounding countryside. Clark's Mountain gave the Confederates a superb observation point from which to monitor the Union army, one which "presented all the advantages of a living map unrolled for their inspection and instruction."<sup>6</sup>

The Army of Northern Virginia was stretched out on a twenty mile front along the upper reaches of the Rapidan River, generally to the southwest of the Wilderness. Until Grant revealed his axis of advance, Lee was forced to deploy his army in a manner that would permit an effective

reaction to a movement around either flank. At midnight on 3 May, the Army of the Potomac began moving to the Rapidan River. Led by two of Sheridan's cavalry divisions, the Army of the Potomac drove Confederate pickets away from Ely's Ford and Germanna Ford, the two key crossing points across the eastern part of the Rapidan River. Union engineers had quickly erected double pontoon bridges at the two fords, and the army began crossing. General Winfield S. Hancock's II Corps--the largest in the army--crossed at Ely's Ford in the east, and moved into the Wilderness towards Chancellorsville. General Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps crossed at Germanna Ford six miles to the west, and moved into the Wilderness along the Germanna Plank road towards Old Wilderness Tavern. General John Sedgwick's VI Corps followed behind Warren's V Corps. All movements proceeded as directed by Meade's detailed orders of 2 May.<sup>7</sup> General Ambrose E. Burnside's IX Corps, subordinate directly to Grant, marched towards the Rapidan River fords from the north, and crossed the next day. The nature of Lee's deployment meant that the Confederates could not contest the Union crossing at the river.

"The movement was successful in every respect. The units of the army were exceedingly well handled, and in all my observation there were no movements ever made where everything was accomplished with so much ease as this opening march. The troops were in the best of spirits. They believed that the supreme effort to bring the rebellion to a close was being made. There was enthusiasm and determination in the minds of everyone."

Grant was well satisfied with the success of his initial march, for he had been apprehensive of his army's vulnerability to attack during the crossing.<sup>9</sup>

The Union forces ended their march in the early afternoon of 4 May with the leading infantry corps in the vicinity of Chancellorsville and Old Wilderness Tavern. The two cavalry divisions stopped some three miles ahead, screening generally to the west. Grant had hoped to rapidly move through the unfavorable terrain of the Wilderness, but the reduced logistical train of some 4,300 wagons was still much too large to pass through along the two roads in the limited time available. He halted the combat elements in order to provide protection for the supply wagons.<sup>10</sup> This early halt on 4 May was to set the stage for a major struggle in the restricted terrain of the Wilderness over the next two days.

Lee set the Army of Northern Virginia in motion on 4 May with the intent of striking Grant's flank as the Union army pushed through the Wilderness. General Richard S. Ewell's 17,000 man II Corps marched along the Orange-Fredericksburg Turnpike towards the Old Wilderness Tavern. General Ambrose P. Hill marched two-thirds of his 22,000 man III Corps along the Orange Plank Road about two and one half miles to the south towards Chancellorsville.

On the morning of 5 May, Ewell's II Corps collided with Warren's V Corps. The cavalry of both armies had not provided proper reconnaissance to give their respective

commanders any intelligence of the strength and dispositions of the opposing forces.<sup>11</sup> Steere noted that as the army's "eyes and ears", Sheridan's cavalry "saw little and heard scarcely anything."<sup>12</sup> Meade immediately ordered an attack, an action which suited Grant's aggressive style of combat:

"If any opportunity presents itself for pitching into a part of Lee's army, do so without giving time for dispositions."<sup>13</sup>

As both sides attacked, Sedgwick's VI Corps moved to take up positions on the right flank of V Corps, and Hancock's II Corps moved toward Brock Road to support the left flank. Hill's III Corps pushed back a Union cavalry screen along the Orange Plank Road. Burnside's IX Corps began crossing the Rapidan River at Germanna Ford in the early afternoon, as the inconclusive struggle died down along the Orange-Fredericksburg Turnpike. In the late afternoon, Hancock's II Corps, reinforced with a division from Sedgwick's VI Corps, attacked Hill's III Corps, which it outnumbered by more than two-to-one. Bitter fighting raged until nightfall at 2000 hours, with the Confederates managing to hold their line with a series of desperate counterattacks. Steere felt that only the arrival of darkness prevented a decisive defeat of Hill's III Corps.<sup>14</sup> Skirmishing continued through the evening of 5 May, as both sides prepared to commit their full strength to the struggle at first light.<sup>15</sup>



The restricted nature of the terrain made the Wilderness a soldiers' battle, as the organized movement of large formations off of the narrow roads and trails extremely difficult. Corps and division commanders lost control of their subordinate units, and the battle was fought at the small unit level in blind attacks through the thick underbrush. The Union superiority in numbers and artillery could not be brought effectively to bear, while the Confederates used their superior skills as woodsmen and intimate knowledge of the terrain to good advantage.<sup>16</sup> Fighting in isolated units under conditions of limited visibility placed tremendous stress on the soldiers:

"The pattern of Wilderness fighting had been set, and one of its principal elements was panic, which came easily and spread rapidly on terrain that had all the claustrophobic qualities of a landscape in nightmare...."<sup>17</sup>

While the terrain of the Wilderness clearly favored the Confederates, Grant's nature was such that he was content to fight Lee wherever he found him, always attacking and maintaining the tactical initiative.<sup>18</sup>

Grant ordered Meade to launch attacks at 0500 hours on 6 May all across the front.<sup>19</sup> On his right flank, Sedgwick's VI Corps and Warren's V Corps were repulsed by Ewell's II Corps. Hancock's II Corps, reinforced with a division from each of the other two corps, met with immediate success in his attack against Hill's heavily outnumbered III Corps:<sup>20</sup>

"All attacked the enemy with great vigor, and after a desperate contest the enemy's line was broken at all points, and he was driven in confusion through the forest, suffering severe loss in killed, wounded, and prisoners."<sup>21</sup>

The Confederates in this sector of the line were completely worn out by the previous day's fighting. They had expected to be relieved during the night, and had made little attempt to straighten out their lines and entrench their positions.<sup>22</sup> Lee's right flank was broken by 0600 hours, and the Army of Northern Virginia faced disastrous defeat. "Final victory was not ten minutes away,"<sup>23</sup> when James Longstreet's 11,000 man I Corps came rapidly up the Orange Plank Road and attacked directly from the march:

"His counterattack on this field unquestionably averted a crushing defeat of the Army of Northern Virginia and enabled Lee to prolong the war for another year."<sup>24</sup>

The Union advance was halted, and the battle stabilized over the next five hours. Portions of Burnside's IX Corps--formation which was not part of the Army of the Potomac under Grant's system of command relationships--were gradually fed into the line, furnishing a third division to reinforce Hancock's II Corps. The Union formations in the tangled thicket became more and more intermixed across lines of command.

During the lull in the fighting, Longstreet secretly moved forces on a covered approach along an unfinished railroad line that paralleled the Orange Plank Road. At 1100 hours, he launched a sudden attack against the

exposed flank of Hancock's II Corps. The Union line was shattered, and the Confederates drove them back in confusion to a line of breastworks which Hancock had ordered constructed along the Brock Road the day before. Longstreet was severely wounded while leading the attack, accidentally shot by his own soldiers within a mile of the spot where Stonewall Jackson had fallen under similar circumstances the year before.<sup>25</sup> The momentum of the attack was lost after Longstreet fell, and it took Lee hours to reorganize for further attacks.<sup>26</sup> Hancock rallied his men there, and reported his line as stabilized by 1700 hours.<sup>27</sup> Attacks and counterattacks continued along the line, with some of the fighting being hand-to-hand combat. The woods caught fire, adding to the horror:

"Forest fires raged; ammunition-trains exploded; the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded, roused by its hot breath, dragged themselves along, with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames; and every bush seemed hung with shreds of blood-stained clothing. It was as though Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth."<sup>28</sup>

A final major Confederate attack on the Union left flank was repulsed late in the afternoon. At 1800 hours, Lee launched a flanking attack on Sedgwick's VI Corps on the far right of the Union line, and the attack managed to roll Sedgwick's men back in confusion.<sup>29</sup> As darkness approached, the armies lay exhausted in their works. There was no major fighting on 7 May in the Wilderness, for Grant judged that further attacks would be pointless.

The Army of the Potomac had sustained heavy losses in the tangled thickets of the wilderness, and many expected Grant to pull his army back in order to rest and refit it before the next round with Lee.<sup>30</sup> This had been the pattern with the Army of the Potomac after its battles during the three previous years of conflict. As darkness fell on 7 May, Grant began pulling the army out of its positions, and sent it moving to the southeast down the Brock Road towards Spotsylvania Courthouse. This movement surprised and pleased his soldiers:

"Instead of running like a beaten dog back across the Rapidan River, the Army of the Potomac moved forward like a victorious legion. The troops were overjoyed. Brandishing burning pine knots, they cheered Grant and Meade as they rode past. A new chapter was being written in the army's history."<sup>31</sup>

The Wilderness was a battle quite unlike anything which had come before during the three years of the Civil War, for it was fought with unprecedented fury over some of the worst imaginable terrain. Swinton stated that "It is impossible to conceive of a field worse adapted to the movements of a grand army."<sup>32</sup> While the terrain hampered the operations of both armies, it was clearly advantageous to the Army of Northern Virginia. The terrain served to reduce the impact of the Army of the Potomac's overwhelming superiority in manpower and artillery. Maneuver of large formations off the limited road network was difficult, and even more so for the Union forces, for they were much less familiar with the terrain. Neither of the commanders was

able to exercise effective command and control over more than a portion of the frontage at any one time, and formations--particularly Burnside's IX Corps--were often unable to find their way to their appointed places in a timely manner. There were few places where Grant could effectively employ his strong artillery arm due to the restricted fields of fire. The limited road net greatly slowed the movement of Grant's 4,300-wagon supply train. By bringing on a general engagement in the Wilderness, Lee had maximized his army's prospects for victory.

The full extent of the losses suffered by both armies will never be known with certainty. The Official Records list Union losses as 17,666 men, including 2,246 killed, 12,037 wounded, and 3,383 missing.<sup>33</sup> Humphreys estimated that the Army of the Potomac sustained approximately 15,400 casualties, including those of Burnside's IX Corps, while the Army of Northern Virginia sustained perhaps 11,400.<sup>34</sup> Others estimate somewhat higher Union losses and much lower Confederate losses, resulting in a casualty ratio as high as two-to-one. Grant stated that the Confederates may have actually suffered more severe losses than his own army,<sup>35</sup> although his memoirs cannot be considered to be an unbiased account. At the time of the battle, Grant wrote in a 7 May letter to Halleck that he believed Confederate losses were more heavy than his own, although he did not claim a victory. A day later in a second letter to Halleck, Grant seemed to become

more positive, stating that "the results of the three days fight at Old Wilderness was decidedly in our favor."<sup>36</sup>

Many veteran officers had been lost, beginning the attrition among the key leadership of both armies that was to characterize the campaign. Most notable among these was the wounding of Longstreet, which was to deprive Lee of his most trusted subordinate. Grant regarded Longstreet's loss to have been particularly significant:

"His loss was a severe one to Lee, and compensated in a great measure for the mishap, or mis-apprehensions, which had fallen to our lot during the day."<sup>37</sup>

If one were to analyze the Wilderness fighting in no more depth than to compare the lengths of the respective casualty lists to measure the outcome, then Lee had beaten Grant in during their first encounter of the Overland Campaign.

A strong case can be made that Lee did indeed win in the Wilderness. Grant had been unable to achieve surprise with his initial movement, and Lee was able to decisively engage the Army of the Potomac in terrain most favorable to his Army of Northern Virginia. By whatever casualty estimates that are used, he inflicted far greater losses on the Army of the Potomac than he sustained. Lee's great counterattack against Hancock's exposed flank on 6 May had threatened the Army of the Potomac with disaster. Sheppard believed that if the wounding of Longstreet had not caused the attack to lose organization and momentum,

Lee might have achieved significant results.<sup>38</sup> Steere was highly critical of Lee for halting the planned maneuver after Longstreet was wounded, for the failure to press the temporarily demoralized and disorganized Union left wing threw away his last chance for victory.<sup>39</sup> Foote observed that had the attack against Sedgwick's VI Corps on the Union right flank gone in seven hours earlier to coincide with this counterattack, then Lee might have gained a decisive victory.<sup>40</sup> General John B. Gordon, who led the attack, later claimed that "Had daylight lasted one half-hour longer, there would not have been left an organized company in Sedgwick's Corps."<sup>41</sup> While Steere believed that too much has been made of Gordon's attack, even Grant admitted that "Had daylight prevailed, the enemy could have injured us very much in the confusion that prevailed."<sup>42</sup> Despite Lee's missing this opportunity for a decisive victory, Foote concluded that Grant had been beaten even worse than General Joseph Hooker had been beaten at Chancellorsville a year earlier:

"By every tactical standard, although the earlier contest was often held up as a model of Federal ineptitude, the second was even worse-fought than the first. Hooker had had but one flank turned; Grant had both. Hooker had achieved at least a measure of surprise in the opening stage of his campaign; Grant achieved none. Indeed, the latter had been surprised himself, while on a march designed to avoid battle on the very ground where this one raged for two horrendous days, not only without profit to the invaders, but also at a cost so disproportionate that it emphasized the wisdom of his original intent to avoid a confrontation on this terrain."<sup>43</sup>

Catton agreed that "Technically, his army had been whipped quite as badly as Hooker's army had been whipped at Chancellorsville."<sup>44</sup> Despite nearly continuous attacks by a army nearly twice the size of his own, Lee remained in possession of his lines on the battlefield until Grant called off the fighting on 7 May.

A strong case, however, can also be made that it was Grant who won in the Wilderness. While he sustained far heavier losses than did Lee, the Army of the Potomac was twice the size of the Army of Northern Virginia, so the casualties were proportionately equal. The loss of Longstreet was a particularly heavy blow that disheartened Lee and his army, and reduced their prospects for success through the remainder of the campaign. Grant may not have achieved strategic surprise with his initial movement, but he did achieve enough surprise to avoid engagement during the crossing of the Rapidan River, when the Army of the Potomac was most vulnerable. Lee may have anticipated the movement into the Wilderness, but he could not be sure, and left Longstreet's I Corps out of position and unable to influence the fighting on 5 May.

Grant, too, came close to winning a decisive victory in the Wilderness. While his attacks against Ewell's II Corps were costly failures, Hancock's attack down the Orange Plank Road on 6 May was a near disaster for Lee, "which nothing but the merest chance averted."<sup>45</sup> Steere considered Grant's attack to have been "one of the



significant operations of modern military history." He also observed that if Grant had allowed the attack to be postponed until 0630 hours as Meade had requested, Longstreet would have already arrived on the battlefield 30 minutes before.<sup>46</sup> Costly as they may have been, Grant's continual attacks ensured that he retained the initiative almost throughout the battle. Leckie concluded that these heavy losses did not determine victory:

"Casualties, however, measure only the cost of battle. It was Grant who was the victor. He had achieved his objective: he had held Lee, had fixed him, had thrown him on the defensive. All<sup>47</sup> Lee's move here after were in response to Grant's."

Marshall-Cornwall's analysis of the Wilderness was that the battle was a draw, but that it must be considered a strategic victory.<sup>48</sup> This view echoes that of Fuller, who wrote that while the battle was tactically a draw, it constituted the greatest Union victory yet won in the east. Grant had fixed Lee's Army of Northern Virginia within forty-eight hours of the start of his campaign. Fuller went on to note that the Confederate attack on 6 May was the last time that Lee would be able to assume the offensive, and was forced to employ a purely defensive strategy from that time onward.<sup>49</sup>

Grant certainly suffered a tactical defeat in the Wilderness Operation. He did show "great determination, but no particular skill," as Esposito noted.<sup>50</sup> The Army of the Potomac paid a terrible price in blood and was nearly defeated because of the uninspired leadership of a man who

had displayed remarkable genius on previous battlefields. Some weaknesses in Grant's system of command relationships already had begun to become evident with the delay in Burnside's IX Corps' arrival on the battlefield on 5 May. Cleaves attributed this delay to the dual command situation:

"In the continued absence of Burnside, the disadvantage of a divided command became manifest-- Grant's chief of staff,<sup>51</sup> not Humphreys, had failed to get him up on time."

The Wilderness Operation can only be properly analyzed within the context of the campaign which followed. In light of the events which followed, Grant won a costly strategic victory. Fighting over the worst possible terrain, he withstood the best shot for victory of the strongest Confederate army led by its greatest general, and he continued on with his strategic plan. Grant was not defeated simply because his determination was such that he refused to accept defeat.<sup>52</sup>

"What it boiled down to was that Grant was whipped, and soundly whipped, if he would only admit it by retreating: which in turn was only a way of saying that he had not been whipped at all."<sup>53</sup>

Grant carried on with determination and tenacity, never again surrendering the initiative to Lee at any point until the conclusion of his campaign in the outskirts of Petersburg.

Yet the Army of the Potomac need not have endured the horrors of the Wilderness. Had Grant maneuvered more

decisively, he could have passed his army through the Wilderness on 4 May, and engaged the Army of Northern Virginia in more open terrain to the east. He could have begun his movement several hours earlier, still under cover of darkness, and set up blocking positions with his cavalry along the western edge of the Wilderness:

"No thought appears to have been given to the possibilities of sending out large bodies of cavalry with infantry supports, to retard and blind the enemy's forward movement by lines of dismounted skirmishers, causing his advanced formations to consume valuable time in deploying against an elusive foe."<sup>54</sup>

By using an additional ford and advancing on a broader front, he could have used the extra hours to safely moved his necessary logistical trains through the Wilderness before Lee had a chance to react.<sup>55</sup>

Such a movement may have necessitated further reductions in the more than 4,300 wagons of the supply train, at least in the initial stages of the campaign. Sheridan's Cavalry Corps had a significant firepower advantage with their Spencer repeating rifles, considered to be the greatest advantage in weapons that the Union held over the Confederacy,<sup>56</sup> for these rifles enabled them to lay down a heavy base of fire from relatively unexposed prone firing positions. Foote also felt that such a rapid movement would enable the Army of the Potomac to successfully gain the open country beyond the Wilderness with an earlier start.<sup>57</sup> Marshall-Cornwall thought that the army need not have bivouacked in the Wilderness to wait

for the long supply trains, as each man could carry sufficient rations and ammunition to sustain them for the first few days of a fight in the more open country, where the Union numbers could be brought to bear.<sup>58</sup> Grant might also have opened a supply line through to Fredericksburg, and passed the bulk of his supply train through from there, rather than through the narrow roads of the Wilderness. With more imaginative and decisive maneuver, Grant could certainly have avoided becoming decisively engaged in the unfavorable terrain over which his army fought.

The Army of the Potomac marched around the Confederate right flank towards Spotsylvania Courthouse through the night of 7 May.<sup>59</sup> Grant's intent was to try and get between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond if possible, or at least draw Lee out of the Wilderness into more open terrain. He was also concerned that Lee might make a rapid move south and fall upon Butler's Army of the James.<sup>60</sup> The military significance of Spotsylvania Court House was derived from its location near the railroad, and the stage and telegraph roads running between Fredericksburg and Richmond, as well as the road network which radiated from it.<sup>61</sup> If Grant could reach Spotsylvania before the Confederates, the Army of the Potomac would be between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond. This would force Lee to attack the numerically superior Union army, which might well result in a costly defeat.<sup>62</sup>

Sheridan's cavalry led the march down the Brock Road, followed in turn by Warren's V Corps and Hancock's II Corps, and slowly pushed through a Confederate cavalry screen attempting to delay them. The entire army could not use a single road, so Burnside's IX Corps and Sedgwick's VI Corps took a more circuitous route by marching east towards Chancellorsville. Lee had anticipated the movement, as his men had observed the Union artillery beginning to displace from its Wilderness positions before dark on 7 May,<sup>63</sup> and had heard the sounds of the wagons moving down the Brock Road after dark.<sup>64</sup> He set the Army of Northern Virginia in motion to intercept Grant. The race to Spotsylvania Court House was on.

As Warren's V Corps approached within a couple of miles of Spotsylvania Court House on the morning of 8 May, they were stopped by the recently arrived men of the Confederate I Corps, now commanded by General Richard H. Anderson. Union cavalry under General James H. Wilson had actually occupied Spotsylvania Court House briefly during the day, but were driven off by massed Confederate cavalry commanded by General J.E.B. Stuart. Wilson believed that the failure of Burnside to march rapidly to his aid from the northeast lost a great opportunity:

"With such a union of cavalry and infantry in Lee's right rear, there would have been nothing left for him but to fall back to a new position beyond the next river, or suffer an overwhelming defeat. The bloody battles which took place for the capture and defense of Spottsylvania Court House would have been avoided and many thousand lives

would have been spared to continue operations under much more favorable circumstances."<sup>65</sup>

Anderson's I Corps repelled ineffectual attacks by Warren's V Corps and Sedgwick's VI Corps in the afternoon, and the Army of Northern Virginia began to rapidly construct field fortifications.

One of the reasons that the Army of the Potomac lost the race to Spotsylvania was confusion in the handling of the Union cavalry. Meade was becoming impatient with the cavalry during the advance. He wrote to Sedgwick on 7 May complaining about the lack of intelligence received from VI Corps cavalry, and later placed a cavalry regimental commander under arrest for submitting false reconnaissance reports.<sup>66</sup> Sheridan had failed to properly screen the flanks of the army and to rapidly push aside Stuart's cavalry. His cavalry also blocked the advance of Warren's V Corps.<sup>67</sup> At 0100 hours on 8 May, Meade found two of Sheridan's divisions without orders, and gave them instructions to move forward. He notified Sheridan of his actions:

"I find Generals Gregg and Torbert without orders. They are in the way of the infantry and there is no time to refer to you. I have given them the inclosed orders which you can modify to-day after the infantry corps are in position."<sup>68</sup>

At the same time Meade was ordering the cavalry divisions to move, Sheridan was a few miles away drafting his orders for the divisions to begin moving at 0500 hours to seize bridges across the Po River in order to block the

advance of Anderson's I Corps and support his other division at Spotsylvania Court House.<sup>69</sup> In his memoirs, Sheridan gives the impression that his orders had already been received when Meade modified them, and complained that he was not duly advised of the changes. He claimed that the confusing intermixing of the cavalry and infantry actually resulted from Meade's orders for the cavalry to advance. Sheridan stated that if his orders to the divisions had been carried out, Lee would have been blocked from reaching Spotsylvania in force ahead of the Union army.<sup>70</sup> Sheridan's account reinforces the perception that memoirs tend to be self-serving. Cleaves concluded that if the cavalry divisions had waited until 0500 hours to move, then they would have been too late to accomplish their blocking mission.<sup>71</sup>

In the late morning of 8 May, Meade confronted Sheridan about the delays caused by the poor handling of the cavalry. Sheridan was angry about the accusations, feeling that Meade had fouled-up the situation with the orders he had directly issued to the cavalry division commanders. This caused a confrontation between the two officers, both of whom had quick tempers.<sup>72</sup> Sheridan states in his memoirs that he told Meade that since the Army Commander insisted on giving the cavalry orders without consulting or even informing their corps commander, that Meade could command the Cavalry Corps himself, as he was quitting.<sup>73</sup> Sheridan had long thought that the primary

mission of his Cavalry Corps was to defeat the Confederate cavalry, and had grown increasingly frustrated with the role of screening the army's flanks and guarding its supply trains.<sup>74</sup> He wanted to take his entire Cavalry Corps on a deep strike mission behind the Army of Northern Virginia to disrupt its supply lines and draw its cavalry into a decisive engagement. When Meade reported Sheridan's insubordinate behavior to Grant, rather than supporting his army commander over one of his favorite officers, Grant dealt with the conflict by telling Meade to let Sheridan conduct his raid:<sup>75</sup>

"Whether or not it was unwise to leave the army without adequate cavalry protection and without a strong mobile force for scouting, Sheridan in effect was asking for an independent command with which to fight separate engagements. Since Sheridan was always a great favorite with Grant and because ~~he~~ he could fight, the General in Chief nodded assent."<sup>76</sup>

Meade issued orders that night for Sheridan's Cavalry Corps to immediately proceed against the enemy cavalry.<sup>77</sup>

Throughout the day on 9 May, Lee constructed a three mile length of field fortifications in the shape of an inverted "V". Anderson's I Corps held the left flank of the "V", while the III Corps, temporarily commanded by General Jubal A. Early during Hill's illness, held the right flank and Ewell's II Corps held an exposed salient at the point of the "V". The natural features of the terrain were skillfully incorporated into a log and dirt barrier, protected by timber barricades and sharpened sticks that



were covered by interlocking fields of fire. Firing slits were cut into the logs on top of the earthworks to permit the Confederate infantry to fire without exposing themselves.<sup>78</sup> It was soon a formidable defensive position, and Lee could rapidly switch forces from one side of his inverted "V" to the other in response to Union attacks.

The three infantry corps of the Army of the Potomac concentrated astride the Brock Road facing the left flank of Lee's position, while Burnside's IX Corps advanced towards the right flank. Sheridan detached his Cavalry Corps from the Army of the Potomac, circled far around Lee's right flank and moved south towards Richmond.<sup>79</sup> Grant was experiencing frustration with the great difficulties in moving his vast wagon train in the restricted terrain of the Wilderness, remarking in a 9 May letter to Halleck that "My movements are terribly embarrassed by our immense wagon train."<sup>80</sup> Late in the afternoon, Hancock's II Corps threw pontoon bridges across the Po River to the south in an attempt to turn Lee's left flank. Sedgwick was killed by a Confederate sharpshooter, and the loss of this fine officer constituted a severe blow to the morale of the Union army. Grant was struck with grief over Sedgwick's death, noting that "His loss to this army is greater than the loss of a whole division of troops."<sup>81</sup> Hancock's flanking movement was halted by the darkness, and both armies prepared for the next day's fighting.

On the morning of 10 May, Hancock's II Corps continued its flanking movement in accordance with Meade's orders, but the overnight delay had given Lee enough time to react to the movement by shifting forces from his right flank over to his left. While Hancock was maneuvering against the left flank, he received orders to rejoin the rest of the army.<sup>82</sup> Grant had decided to mass his units for a frontal assault against Anderson's I Corps:

"He could have manoeuvred Lee out of his position, but this was the last thing he wanted to do; for Butler was now moving north, and until he could make his strength felt, to maneuver Lee onto him might prove disastrous. Consequently, Grant decided to fix him by another attack; to hammer him as he had hammered him in the Wilderness, to drive him back in disorder, and then to unite with Butler and either knock Lee out, or pin him down within the entrenchments of Richmond, and so facilitate Sherman's maneuver."<sup>83</sup>

Grant's attack finally began at 1600 hours, with Warren's V Corps, supported by elements of Hancock's II Corps, and elements of VI Corps, now commanded by General Horatio G. Wright. The point selected for the attack was one of the strongest portions of the Confederate line.<sup>84</sup> The attack was a complete failure, being repulsed with heavy losses. Shortly after 1800 hours, a division-sized attack from Wright's VI Corps went in against Ewell's II Corps occupying the salient known as the "Mule Shoe" or the "Angle" at the tip of the inverted "V". Painstakingly organized by the brilliant young Colonel Emory Upton, the attack used a concealed approach and established a breach in Lee's line.<sup>85</sup> Grant launched a second major assault at

1900 hours against Anderson's I Corps in support of Upton's success, but this attack was again repulsed. The lack of immediate support made the breach untenable, and Upton was forced to withdraw his soldiers after dark.

Grant had accomplished little through the first three days of the Spotsylvania Operation. He remained optimistic and as determined as ever, as evidenced by his letter of 11 May to Halleck:

"We have now ended the 6th day of very hard fighting. The result up to this time is much in our favor. But our losses have been heavy as well as those of the enemy. We have lost to this time eleven general officers killed, wounded, and missing, and probably twenty thousand men. I think the loss of the enemy must be greater--we have taken over four thousand prisoners in battle, whilst he has taken but few except a few stragglers."<sup>86</sup>

He also wrote a letter to the Secretary of War in which he included the now famous line, "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer."<sup>87</sup>

Grant planned a massive assault against Ewell's II Corps in the "Mule Shoe" with Hancock's II Corps, Burnside's IX Corps, and Wright's VI Corps on 12 May, supported by a third attack by Warren's V Corps against Anderson's I Corps.<sup>88</sup> Lee had suspected another flanking movement, and had pulled Ewell's artillery out of the "Mule Shoe" to facilitate a rapid response once he had confirmed the Union movement.<sup>89</sup> One of the reasons for holding the exposed salient in the first place had been the good fields of fire it offered for the artillery, and the artillery

constituted the real strength of the position.<sup>90</sup> The movement of the artillery was to have near catastrophic consequences for the Army of Northern Virginia the next day.

At 0435 hours on 12 May, the massive Union assault rolled in out of the fog and darkness to the "Mule Shoe". The devastating canister fire that the Union soldiers anticipated did not materialize due to the absence of Ewell's guns, and the frontal attack met with great success. Within an hour, Hancock had broken Ewell's line and swept through the "Mule Shoe", capturing two general officers, four thousand prisoners, thirty colors, thousands of rifles, and thirty pieces of the returning artillery, which were lost before they could be employed.<sup>91</sup> The Union troops poured through, "rushing like a swollen torrent through a broken mill dam."<sup>92</sup> Disaster threatened the Army of Northern Virginia. Had Hancock's men been able to break through an incomplete line at the base of the salient, Lee's army would have been broken into two parts, and "nothing but a miracle could have prevented its annihilation."<sup>93</sup> But the great mass of Union troops in the salient caused confusion and a resulting loss of control.<sup>94</sup> Lee launched a desperate counterattack that inflicted heavy losses firing into the closely packed mob.<sup>95</sup> Lee's counterattack forced Hancock's troops back to the edge of the "Mule Shoe". The bitter hand-to-hand fighting that raged on has been characterized as "the most

vicious battle ever fought on American soil, and possibly one of the most ferocious fought anywhere."<sup>96</sup> Warren's V Corps launched a supporting attack against Anderson's I Corps at 0915 hours, and was repulsed for a third time. Meade felt that Warren had shown a reluctance to attack, and Grant instructed him to replace Warren with Humphreys if he didn't move promptly to assault.<sup>97</sup> The struggle in the "Mule Shoe" continued through the rain until after midnight on 12 May, some twenty hours since the attack was first launched.<sup>98</sup> Unable to recapture his initial positions, Lee finally withdrew his exhausted troops to the line of entrenchments at the base of the salient.

A relative lull set in over the battlefield on 13 May, and Grant decided to conduct a major shift of the Army of the Potomac in an attempt to turn Lee's right flank.<sup>99</sup> Leaving Hancock's II Corps and Burnside's IX Corps in his center, he set Warren's V Corps in motion at dark from his right flank around to his left. Wright's VI Corps began its march from the right flank to the left at 0300 hours on 14 May. The maneuver was plagued by heavy rains, and thick mud in the difficult terrain which slowed and exhausted the troops, while sapping their spirit.<sup>100</sup> Grant was unable to make his planned attack against Lee's right flank on 14 May due to the heavy rains,<sup>101</sup> and Lee was able to move Anderson's I Corps from his left flank to his right to face the threat there. Humphreys noted the lost opportunity:

"Fortune evidently did not favor us on the night of the 13th, for the intrenchments on the Confederate right did not extend much south of the Court House, and only Hill's corps was on that front. With ordinary weather the Fifth and Sixth Corps would have been able to attack there early in the morning, before reinforcements, could have been brought from the Confederate left."<sup>102</sup>

The two armies stood in place from 14 to 17 May, prevented from large scale assaults by the steady rains, while engaging in steady skirmishing all along the lines.<sup>103</sup> Grant received word of defeats suffered by Sigel's Army of West Virginia in the Shenandoah Valley,<sup>104</sup> and by Butler's Army of the James at Drewry's Bluff along the Richmond-Petersburg Railroad. As a result of these defeats, Lee could expect to receive reinforcements from both areas.<sup>105</sup> Grant decided to attempt one final maneuver to turn Lee's flank. He moved Wright's VI Corps from his left flank around to his right flank during the night of 17 May. Hancock's II Corps was also moved to the right flank from a central position in reserve.<sup>106</sup> The attack against Ewell's II Corps, which now held Lee's left flank, went in at first light on 18 May. Burnside's IX Corps supported it with an attack in the center. The Confederates broke the attacks up and repulsed them. The Spotsylvania Operation ended on 19 May, with an abortive Confederate attack by Ewell's II Corps against Warren's V Corps on Grant's right flank, as he shifted his forces for the next major maneuver of his Overland Campaign.<sup>107</sup>

The fighting at Spotsylvania, particularly on 12 May, was even more desperate than in the Wilderness. Seventeen Medals of Honor were awarded for heroic actions by Union soldiers in the "Mule Shoe" on 12 May.<sup>108</sup> For twelve days the struggle continued through the rain and the mud, and the casualty lists lengthened. The Official Records lists Union losses during the period 8-21 May to have been 18,399, including 2,725 killed, 13,416 wounded, and 2,258 missing.<sup>109</sup> Humphreys estimated that the Army of the Potomac had lost approximately 17,700 men.<sup>110</sup> The Army of Northern Virginia lost perhaps 9,000 to 10,000 men,<sup>111</sup> with the disparity a result of Grant's repeated assaults against strong Confederate field fortifications. Lee had again inflicted far greater casualties than he had sustained, although these losses were once again proportionate to the vastly different sizes of the two armies. This time, Grant had come much closer to realizing his goal of a decisive victory, but had been frustrated by mistakes and the fortunes of war.

The ineffective handling of the Union cavalry allowed Anderson's I Corps to narrowly win the race to Spotsylvania. Steere felt that Sheridan "mishandled" the cavalry in this movement.<sup>112</sup> Grant believed that if he had won that race, he could have gotten the Army of the Potomac between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond, and that he could have beaten Lee to the Confederate capital.<sup>113</sup> Sheridan had not cleared the Brock Road rapidly

enough of the Confederate cavalry that was delaying the advance of Warren's V Corps. He ended up congesting the limited roads with his cavalry, further slowing the infantry's advance. In his formal report of 13 May 1866, Sheridan harshly criticized Meade's interference:

"Had these movements been carried out successfully, it would probably have sufficiently delayed the march of the enemy to Spotsylvania Court House as to enable our infantry to reach that point first, and the battles fought there would probably have occurred elsewhere; but upon the arrival of General Meade at Todd's Tavern the orders were changed, and Gregg was simply directed by him to hold Corbin's Bridge, and Merritt's division ordered in front of the infantry column, marching on the road to Spotsylvania in the darkness of the night, the cavalry and infantry becoming entangled in the advance, causing much confusion and delay."<sup>114</sup>

The heated conflict between Sheridan and Meade over the handling of the cavalry was evidence of a weakness in the Army of the Potomac's command relationships. By virtue of the personal relationship he had established with Grant in the west, Sheridan could afford to be insubordinate to Meade. His announcement to Meade that he was quitting was not actually a high-risk action, for he knew that Grant was unlikely to allow Meade to accept the resignation. By siding with Sheridan, Grant seriously undercut Meade's authority as army commander, and did not resolve the conflict between two of his key subordinates. While Meade did not mention the argument when describing Sheridan's Raid in a 16 May letter to his wife,<sup>115</sup> his relationship with Sheridan steadily deteriorated through the rest of the



war. He finally began to reveal the depth of his distaste for Sheridan in another letter written shortly after Lee's surrender:

"His [Sheridan] determination to absorb the credit of everything done is so manifest as to have attracted the attention of the whole army, and the truth will in time be made known. His conduct towards me has been beneath contempt, and will most assuredly react against him in the minds of all just and fair-minded persons."<sup>116</sup>

While Grant managed to calm the conflict between Meade and Sheridan, he achieved this at the cost of depriving his army of his cavalry arm by authorizing the cavalry raid. Even Fuller, who agreed with Grant's decision to dispatch Sheridan on his raid, felt that at least one of the cavalry divisions should have been retained with the army.<sup>117</sup> The aggressive use of the Union cavalry to maneuver around the immediate flanks of the Army of Northern Virginia could have given Grant a powerful tactical option. However, he relinquished that option in an almost casual manner at the very beginning of the Spotsylvania Operation.

Hancock's flanking movement ordered by Meade against Lee's left on 9 May<sup>118</sup> offered good prospects for early success, and it was a mistake for Grant to recall the II Corps on 10 May,<sup>119</sup> particularly for the purpose of making what Esposito has called a "Fredericksburg-style direct assault on the strongest sector of Lee's position."<sup>120</sup> Humphreys suggested that better timing might have increased the prospects for success with the flanking attack:

"It is to be regretted that Hancock had not been directed to cross the Po at daylight of the 10th, instead of being ordered to cross late in the afternoon of the 9th. Had he been, there appears to be every reason to conclude that the Confederate left would have been turned and taken in rear, while the Fifth Corps attacked it in front."<sup>121</sup>

Together with Sheridan's absent cavalry, this plan might well have succeeded in turning Lee out of his formidable field fortifications into open country, where the Army of the Potomac's numerical superiority could be brought to bear.

The three frontal attacks launched against Anderson's I Corps on 10 and 12 May were pointless. All three were repulsed with heavy losses, and without any gain whatsoever. Foote found Grant's statements about leaving the Wilderness because he saw no profit in assaulting Lee's entrenchments to be incongruous in light of his willingness to attack the even more formidable Confederate field fortifications at Spotsylvania.<sup>122</sup> The defensive power of entrenched infantry armed with rifles was tremendous:

"With such intrenchments as these, having artillery throughout, with flank fire along their lines wherever practicable, and with the rifled muskets then in use, which were as effective at three hundred yards as the smooth-bore muskets at sixty yards, the strength of an army sustaining attack was more than quadrupled, provided they had force enough to man the intrenchments well."<sup>123</sup>

Grant seems not to have fully appreciated that power. Grant's great assault against the "Mule Shoe" on 12 May, however, was a spectacular success. Grant came close to

breaking the Army of Northern Virginia in two, and defeating Lee completely. Grant inflicted most of the damage sustained by the Confederate army in the desperate fighting in the salient on 12 May. The losses were particularly heavy among the major unit commanders, continuing a pattern that had cost the Army of Northern Virginia more than a third of its corps, division, and brigade commanders in the first eight days of combat in the Overland Campaign.<sup>124</sup> Much of the success of this frontal assault can be traced to the fortuitous absence of the Confederate artillery at the crucial moment, as a result of one of only two blunders Lee made during the entire campaign.

These costly assaults on the strong Confederate fortifications began to impact on the army's morale:

"The Wilderness was a private's battle. The men fought as best they could, and fought staunchly. The generals could not see the ground, and if they were on the front line, they could not see their troops. The enlisted men did not expect much generalship to be shown. All they expected was to have the battle-torn portions of the line fed with fresh troops. There was no chance for a display of military talent on our side, only for the enlisted man to fight, and fight, and fight; and that they did cheerfully and bravely. Here the Confederates are strongly intrenched, and it was the duty of our generals to know the strength of the works before they launched the army against them."<sup>125</sup>

The Army of the Potomac had begun to lose its spirit after the suffering, the fatigue, and the frustration of trying to carry positions that Swinton characterized as being "by nature and art impregnable."<sup>126</sup> Wilson traced this decline

of Union elan from the end of the Wilderness fighting, and even Hancock and Meade ultimately noted the declining vigor with which their soldiers pressed home their assaults a month later at Petersburg.<sup>127</sup> The morale of Grant's army was to deteriorate as the campaign wore on, and as its bravest officers and men were killed.

On 13 and 14 May, Grant's movement of Warren's V Corps and Wright's VI Corps from his right flank around behind his army to strike at Lee's right flank was inspired generalship. He was relying once again on maneuver and flank attacks, rather than on yet another frontal assault. The failure of this effort was a result of heavy rains and thick mud, for Lee was slow to react to this unexpected maneuver.<sup>128</sup> Humphreys noted that the Confederate fortifications did not extend much beyond Spotsylvania Court House, and he thought that had they experienced ordinary weather, the move could have succeeded.<sup>129</sup>

Grant now had reason to re-evaluate some of his original organization of the Army of the Potomac. He decided to reduce the quantity of his artillery, and sent more than one-hundred pieces back to Washington. In the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Operations, the restricted terrain had prevented much of it from getting into action, and it had merely served to block the narrow roads and consume vast quantities of forage--forage that also had to be hauled over those same narrow roads. Through this action, Grant was able to reduce his trains by more than

1200 horses.<sup>130</sup> General Henry J. Hunt, Chief of Artillery of the Army of the Potomac, managed to convince Meade to maintain the Artillery Reserve by instead reducing most of the artillery batteries from six guns down to four guns each. The flexibility of this structure had proven itself to be an important advantage enjoyed by the Union army.<sup>131</sup> The field artillery of the Civil War was generally ineffective against the type of defensive works that the Army of the Potomac was facing:

"The artillery of this period was devastating against troops caught in the open, but was relatively ineffective against crude breastworks and trenches. The explosive charges of its shells lacked the power necessary to destroy them, and its fuzes were too erratic to enable the gunners to place accurate fire on the men behind them."<sup>132</sup>

Grant was therefore able to reduce the congestion on his main supply route and speed the movements of his army by reducing his field artillery, without significantly reducing the Army of the Potomac's offensive combat power.

Another second problem with Grant's initial organization of the Army of the Potomac for the campaign was the new infantry corps structure. The 25,000 man corps had proven to be too cumbersome for maneuvering in the heavily forested terrain.<sup>133</sup> In light of the experiences of the campaign, Charles Porter concluded that large corps could not be successfully handled, and that smaller ones would have been better.<sup>134</sup> Humphreys felt that five 15,000 man infantry corps would ease the command and control problems posed by extensive lines of battle over heavily

wooded terrain.<sup>135</sup> Of course, Grant's heavy losses in both soldiers and senior officers probably made any reorganization a moot point at this stage of the Overland Campaign.

At this point in the campaign, Grant had taken much closer tactical control of the Army of the Potomac than either he or Meade had anticipated happening before crossing the Rapidan River. Meade's letters to his wife on 26 and 27 March indicate satisfaction with the way Grant had promptly adopted all of his suggestions concerning the army.<sup>136</sup> On 13 April he seemed to have drawn some definite conclusions as to how Grant's command and control system would operate:

"Grant has not given an order, or in the slightest degree interfered with the administration of this army since he arrived, and I doubt if he knows much more about it now than he did before coming here. It is undoubtedly true he will go with it when it moves, and will in a measure control its movements [emphasis added], and should success attend its operations, that my share of the credit will be less than if he were not present."<sup>137</sup>

By the end of the Spotsylvania Operation, Meade informed some visiting politicians that "At first I maneuvered the army, but gradually and from the very nature of things, Grant had taken control."<sup>138</sup> Steere noted this process beginning as soon as the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River:

"Even before leaving his headquarters camp at Germanna Ford, Grant began interfering with Meade in the exercise of his command."<sup>139</sup>

From the beginning, Grant had issued orders directly to Burnside--as his IX Corps was not under Meade's command--and he ended up directing the movements of the other corps while using Meade as something of a chief of staff. Cleaves noted that increasing concerns about this issue were raised at the end of the Spotsylvania Operation:

"Lack of success fomented inquiry at Grant's headquarters whether there was not something amiss in the chain of command. As the two armies buried their dead and fought occasional battles next day, Grant was urged by his aides to transmit his orders directly to the corps leader, by-passing Meade."<sup>140</sup>

The way the command relationships evolved during the campaign probably caused more friction and confusion than if Grant had more carefully thought through how he intended to operate at the beginning of the campaign, and then structured his system of command relationships accordingly.

In many respects, Lee had again out-generalled Grant. In the Wilderness he had engaged the Army of the Potomac in unfavorable terrain, and at Spotsylvania he had induced Grant to assault formidable entrenchments.<sup>141</sup> The Army of Northern Virginia had inflicted terrific casualties while repelling repeated Union attacks against their prepared positions. But Grant was relentlessly maintaining the initiative, and Lee's army was also sustaining heavy casualties. They were fighting continuously, day after day --without reserves--to avoid destruction. Despite the fighting prowess of the Army of Northern Virginia, it is doubtful whether any Confederate general other than Lee

could have withstood Grant in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania. Even Lee narrowly avoided decisive defeat on 12 May, as his entire position had been penetrated, and it took heroic measures to restore the situation. Had Grant retained Sheridan's Cavalry Corps and used it effectively at Spotsylvania, he could probably have defeated Lee and ended the war months earlier. This would have required him to directly address and resolve the conflict between Sheridan and Meade by clarifying Meade's role and his authority. Grant was apparently unwilling to do so, and dealt with the conflict by sending his cavalry arm away before the battle was joined. The Spotsylvania Operation was one of missed opportunities by Grant for decisive victory, but he still was managing to achieve at least one of the the strategic goals of his campaign, although at an enormous cost in the lifeblood of the Army of the Potomac.

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## CHAPTER THREE

The Wilderness and Spotsylvania Operations involved more than two weeks of virtually continuous combat between the two great armies of the Civil War. In light of the heavy casualties and lack of decisive results gained thus far, Grant decided to attempt another flanking maneuver around Lee's right in a bid to place his army between the Army of Northern Virginia and Richmond, or at least to bring it to battle outside of its entrenchments in more open country. The defeat of the two coordinating armies in the east--defeats which Grant characterized as "disasters"<sup>1</sup>--had reduced the prospects for destroying Lee's army in the field. On 15 May, Sigel's Army of West Virginia lost the Battle of New Market in the Shenandoah Valley,<sup>2</sup> and on 16 May Butler's Army of the James lost the Battle of Drewry's Bluff along the Richmond-Petersburg Railroad.<sup>3</sup> These twin defeats not only reduced the pressure on the Confederacy, but freed their forces to release critically needed reinforcements to Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia for the showdown with Grant and the Army of the Potomac.

Butler's Army of the James had seized Bermuda Hundred with little difficulty on 5 May. This peninsula on the south bank of the James River was located 16 miles south of Richmond and 8 miles north of Petersburg. Here he



was presented with the opportunity to strike a powerful blow against the Confederacy, for both Richmond and Petersburg were poorly defended. Butler proposed a bold plan to immediately move on Richmond during the night of 5-6 May, which might have yielded considerable results, but the plan was opposed by his corps commanders. Butler interdicted the Richmond-Petersburg Railroad on 6 and 7 May, and advanced to threaten Petersburg. He could have seized Petersburg, but upon receiving word of Grant's move to Spotsylvania, he elected to move north to operate in conjunction with the Army of the Potomac at Richmond, in accordance with the General in Chief's previous guidance. Eight miles south of Richmond at Drewry's Bluff, the Army of the James was defeated on 16 May in a battle marked by the indifferent performance of the professional soldiers Grant had selected to guide Butler.<sup>4</sup> Grant had properly recognized the need to shore-up the leadership of the Army of the James to assist the inexperienced Butler, but his choice of leaders was poor, and this fault in the system of command relationships bears a good measure of the responsibility for the operation's failure.

Sheridan's Cavalry Raid Operation began at the start of the Spotsylvania Operation and ended seventeen days later, in the middle of the North Anna Operation. On 9 May, Sheridan led a massed formation of three divisions with 10,000 cavalymen and six batteries of horse artillery on a looping march, at a walk to save the horses, behind

the Army of the Potomac and around the right flank of the Army of Northern Virginia towards Richmond.<sup>5</sup> Sheridan believed that his Cavalry Corps should engage the enemy cavalry, rather than simply screening the infantry.<sup>6</sup> Grant later identified three objectives for the raid. He intended to cut Lee's lines of communications and supply, protect the Army of the Potomac's supply trains by drawing off Stuart's cavalry, and ease the considerable burden on his logistical system of supporting the forage and supply requirements of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps.<sup>7</sup> While Grant does not mention it, the raid also served to diffuse the open conflict that had developed between Meade and Sheridan during the movement to Spotsylvania.<sup>8</sup>

Sheridan crossed the Ny, Po, and Ta Rivers and reached the North Anna River on the night of 9 May. Stuart followed with the bulk of the Confederate cavalry, although Sheridan outnumbered him by over two-to-one, and enjoyed a substantial advantage in both horseflesh and in firepower with his repeating rifles. Sheridan crossed the North Anna River on 10 May, and burned a major Confederate supply dump at Beaver Dam Station on the Virginia Central Railroad. The Beaver Dam Station supply dump contained 1,500,000 rations,<sup>9</sup> a three-week supply of food Lee badly needed at Spotsylvania:

"In just one day, by this one blow, Sheridan had accomplished more than any of his predecessors had managed to do in the past three years."<sup>10</sup>

Sheridan tore up ten miles of railroad track, and freed several hundred Union prisoners of war. He crossed the South Anna River on the night of 10 May.

On 11 May, Sheridan destroyed six miles of track on the Richmond-Fredericksburg Railroad. He fought the Confederate cavalry at Yellow Tavern, some six miles north of Richmond, and swept them from the field in a sharp encounter, killing Stuart in the process.<sup>11</sup> The death of Stuart was a severe blow to the morale of the Confederacy in general and Lee in particular.<sup>12</sup> It was one more example of the catastrophic losses that Grant was inflicting on the senior leadership of the Army of Northern Virginia during the campaign. The victory over the Confederate cavalry was a significant morale boost to the Union cavalrymen.<sup>13</sup> Sheridan approached the thinly-held defenses of Richmond, but decided to veer off to the east. Wilson, one of Sheridan's divisional commanders, later maintained that Richmond could have been taken with a bold stroke by the 12,000 cavalrymen, and that a great opportunity was lost.<sup>14</sup> Sheridan reached Haxall's Landing on the James River on 14 May, meeting there with Butler.<sup>15</sup> He reported to Meade on the success of his raid, and boasted that: "If I could be permitted to cross the James River and go southward I could almost ruin the Confederacy."<sup>16</sup> Butler seemed to have definite notions of adding Sheridan's strength to the Army of the James,<sup>17</sup> an idea that could not have interested Sheridan less.

Sheridan rested his Cavalry Corps there until 17 May, and then marched north across the Chickahominy and Pamunkey Rivers to rejoin the Army of the Potomac at the North Anna River on 24 May. Grant had instructed Halleck on 17 May to send Sheridan back, but Sheridan had anticipated this and was already on the move.<sup>18</sup> Grant considered the raid to have been a complete success:

"Sheridan in this memorable raid passed entirely around Lee's army; encountered his cavalry in four engagements, and defeated them in all; recaptured four hundred Union prisoners and killed and captured many of the enemy; destroyed and used many supplies and munitions of war; destroyed miles of railroad and telegraph, and freed us from annoyance by the<sup>19</sup>cavalry of the enemy for more than two weeks."

The Official Records list the total Union casualties of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps from 9 to 24 May as 625, including 64 killed, 337 wounded, and 224 missing.<sup>20</sup> While Sheridan did achieve some successes, those successes came at a high cost in lost opportunities at the critical fighting at Spotsylvania. There is no evidence to indicate that Grant had given any serious consideration to the costs and benefits of the operation before authorizing it. Grant's previous experiences in the west with Confederate cavalry raids on his own lines of communications may have encouraged him to this use of his powerful cavalry arm. In December 1862, Grant's thrust down the Mississippi Central Railroad towards Vicksburg was frustrated by cavalry raids on his lines of communications by Generals Earl Van Dorn and especially Nathan Bedford Forrest. After being cut off

of all communications for a week, and having his supplies disrupted for fully two weeks, Grant undoubtedly appreciated the discomfort that raiding cavalry could cause an army commander.<sup>21</sup>

Reducing the forage demands on his logistical system, which Grant cited, may have been more than just a supporting factor in his decision.<sup>22</sup> Cooling the heated conflict between Meade and Sheridan was probably much more than merely an attractive additional benefit of the operation, and may well have been the deciding factor in Grant's mind for the operation. Whatever Grant's true reasons were, the results of the raid did not justify its cost:

"Sheridan's Richmond raid was an adventurous foray but it had little strategic effect. The absence of the Cavalry Corps seriously hampered the operations of the Army of the Potomac, which was left without its mounted arm for reconnaissance duties. In the fighting round Spottsylvania Sheridan's men, armed as they were with Sharp's breech-loading carbines and Spencer magazine carbines, would have been an invaluable adjunct had they been used as mobile mounted infantry."<sup>23</sup>

Ropes concluded that while the raid may "have caused some inconvenience to the enemy", Grant needed every man he could field for the main fighting.<sup>24</sup> The raid itself may have been worthwhile, but only with a much smaller force-- which probably could have accomplished just as much.

Sheridan rejoined Grant on 24 May at the North Anna River,<sup>25</sup> and once again provided the Army of the Potomac with the capability to perform the reconnaissance and

security missions that were vital to a successful invasion of hostile territory. This cavalry was to play a key role in the remaining operations of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia.

The North Anna Operation began on 20 May, with the Army of the Potomac pulling out of its positions at Spotsylvania and moving off towards Guiney's Station some eight miles away to the southeast.<sup>26</sup> To better support this move, Grant advanced his forward base of supply from Belle Plain on the Potomac River, some eight miles to the northeast of Fredericksburg, to Port Royal on the Rappahannock River, sixteen miles to the southeast of Fredericksburg.<sup>27</sup> The march from Spotsylvania began with Hancock's II Corps, followed at a distance by Warren's V Corps. Wright's VI Corps and Burnside's IX Corps remained near Spotsylvania to try and hold Lee in position by giving him the impression of an intended assault.<sup>28</sup> Grant offered Lee the opportunity to try and seize the initiative by striking Hancock's exposed II Corps as it moved ahead of the army, in something of a gambit to try and induce him into fighting out in the open when he could be more easily defeated.<sup>29</sup>

Hancock's II Corps crossed the Mattaponi River on 21 May near Milford Station, and Grant set the remainder of his army in motion the same day. The Army of the Potomac crossed the Mattaponi and marched down along the Richmond-Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad, and arrived at the

North Anna River on 23 May. The morale of Grant's soldiers steadily improved as they marched south and away from the formidable entrenchments that they had repeatedly attacked at Spotsylvania. Here, the country was more open and had not been so touched by the war, and the weather improved. They were gaining ground at a much more rapid rate on this maneuver, and they were steadily gaining the confidence and improved morale that advancing armies have historically enjoyed with success.<sup>30</sup>

Lee began moving the Army of Northern Virginia on 21 May in response to Grant's maneuver. Rather than attacking the Union army on the march, Lee moved his army some twenty-one miles to the southwest. Grant had worn down the Army of Northern Virginia to the point where Lee's ability to regain the initiative through offensive operations was severely reduced. Lee arrived on the south bank of the North Anna River on 22 May, a day before the Army of the Potomac could complete its march on exterior lines over unfamiliar territory. Here Lee received more than 9,000 reinforcements, a dividend from the twin Confederate victories over Grant's coordinating armies at Drewry's Bluff and New Market. Lee again established his position in the shape of an inverted "V", five miles in length. The left flank was securely anchored on the Little River, the right flank rested on a swamp, and the tip lay against the North Anna River. In such a position, either flank could be quickly reinforced by pulling troops from the other.<sup>31</sup>

Grant initiated tentative operations in the late afternoon of 23 May, with only a vague knowledge of Lee's dispositions. Hancock's II Corps approached the right flank of Lee's position and drove elements of Ewell's II Corps from a bridgehead on the north bank of the river. Burnside's IX Corps approached Anderson's I Corps at Ox Ford at the tip of the inverted "V", but found the position too strong to attack.<sup>32</sup> Warren's V Corps crossed the North Anna River on the left flank of Lee's position, and repelled an attack by III Corps, which was again commanded by Hill. The activities of 23 May were generally inconclusive in nature.

On 24 May, Grant moved Wright's VI Corps across the North Anna River to the extreme right of the Union line. He also moved Hancock's II Corps across the river opposite Ewell's II Corps on the Confederate right flank.<sup>33</sup> The Army of the Potomac approached Lee's works with considerably more caution than had been evident at Spotsylvania. Not only were these positions strong, but they offered the potential of significant offensive action as well:

"The position of Lee's army, we now see, was well chosen. With its left resting on Little River, the line ran north in open ground to the North Anna at Ox ford, extended along the river three-quarters of a mile, and then ran in a southeast direction to the river at the site of Morris's Bridge. His army was concentrated. The two parts of the Army of the Potomac were not only widely separated, with only a division between them, but the river had to be crossed twice to reinforce one part from the other. Lee could



reinforce a point attacked in one-third of the time that Meade could reinforce at the same point."<sup>34</sup>

With these dispositions, Grant would be unable to rapidly respond to a sudden massing of Confederate forces for an attack against one of his flanks. While the potential did exist for the defeat in detail of one of Grant's flanks, Lee was struck by a crippling case of diarrhea, and was unable to effectively command his army at a critical time.<sup>35</sup>

Sheridan rejoined the Army of the Potomac with his Cavalry Corps on 24 May, which significantly enhanced the army's reconnaissance and screening capability. There was considerable satisfaction in the headquarters with the results of the raid, and Grant clearly felt great affection for Sheridan.<sup>36</sup> Grant also took action on this day to rectify a problem with the command relationships in his army by finally placing Burnside's IX Corps under Meade's command. He reasoned that this consolidation would greatly improve the command and control of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>37</sup>

Grant realized the obvious strength of the entrenched Confederate position, and attempted nothing more than skirmishing activity on both 25 and 26 May, while Lee was incapacitated with his illness. In a letter to Halleck on 26 May, Grant stated that an attack from either wing would "cause a slaughter of our men that even success would not justify."<sup>38</sup> The soldiers agreed:

"The ordinary enlisted men assert that one good man behind an earthwork was equal to three good men outside of it, and that they did not propose to charge many more intrenched lines. Here I first heard savage protests against a continuance of the generalship which consisted in launching good troops against intrenched works which the generals had not inspected. Battle-tried privates came into the battery and sneeringly inquired if the corps and army commanders had been to see our line."<sup>39</sup>

After dark on 26 May, Grant began to withdraw his exposed forces across the North Anna River for his next flanking maneuver.<sup>40</sup> The North Anna Operation was over, without any of the heavy fighting which had characterized the previous operations of the campaign in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania.

Just as there were missed opportunities for the Army of the Potomac at Spotsylvania, there were missed opportunities for the Army of Northern Virginia at North Anna. While it is possible that a great Confederate counterattack against one of the isolated corps on the Union flanks might have ended in a costly failure, the possibility remains that decisive results might have been achieved.<sup>41</sup> It was the last such chance that Lee was to have.

The absence of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps during the North Anna Operation hampered the Army of the Potomac from the beginning, just as it did at Spotsylvania. There was little hope for the movement from Spotsylvania being conducted in secrecy without a thick screen of cavalry to shield it. The cavalry could also have provided much

needed reconnaissance that would have facilitated the army's movement through unfamiliar terrain in enemy territory. As the operation actually developed, Lee easily countered Grant's march using his interior lines, and there was never much chance of beating the Army of Northern Virginia to the North Anna River. The lack of cavalry to perform reconnaissance of the entrenched Confederate positions at North Anna caused Grant to place the Army of the Potomac in a vulnerable position where it might have been badly hurt by a timely counterattack.

Grant's original decision not to place Burnside's IX Corps under the Army of the Potomac was unwise, and has been criticized:

"If anything could add to the manifest inadequacy of Grant's arrangements, it is found in the fact that the 9th Corps was not to be incorporated with the Army of the Potomac, but was to be a sort of independent little army by itself. This was to save General Burnside's feelings, as he ranked General Meade. Even if it had hurt Burnside's feelings, such an arrangement as this, interfering so directly as it did with the utility and efficiency of the organization of the army, should never have been thought of for a moment."<sup>42</sup>

Grant's decision to redress this mistake was a sound one. As it turned out, Burnside fully supported the decision.<sup>43</sup> The return of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps and the rationalization of the command and control organization strengthened the Army of the Potomac for the coming operations. However, a lack of clarity remained concerning Meade's role in managing the tactical operations of his army--for in the next two operations Grant ended up

suddenly thrusting the responsibility for tactical control of the fighting upon Meade.

While it is true that Lee was incapacitated virtually throughout this period, Grant was wise not to test his entrenchments. The position was extremely strong, and the reinforcements Lee received gave him sufficient manpower to repel any Union assaults, no matter how courageously they were pressed home. He appeared to have learned from the experience of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania,<sup>44</sup> and Porter described the relief of the Union soldiers at his decision not to throw them against the Confederate works.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, it would take the killing that was to follow at Cold Harbor to finally convince Grant of the defensive strength of entrenched artillery and infantry armed with rifled muskets.

The Army of the Potomac accomplished the delicate withdrawal from the North Anna positions without difficulty on 26 May. Grant intended to move again southeast and cross the Pamunkey River at Hanover Town, some seventeen miles away.<sup>46</sup> Sheridan's Cavalry Corps played a key role in this movement, conducting a feint on Lee's left flank with one division, while seizing the army's crossing point over the Pamunkey River at Hanover Town Ford in advance of the infantry.<sup>47</sup>

Grant was unhappy with Butler's accomplishments south of Richmond. On 21 May he instructed Halleck to send an inspection team to Bermuda Hundred to evaluate the

situation.<sup>48</sup> The next day he again wrote Halleck, informing him that Lee was receiving reinforcements from Richmond, and stated:

"The force under General Butler is not detaining 10,000 men in Richmond, and is not even keeping the roads south of the city cut. Under these circumstances I think it is advisable to have all of it here except enough to keep a foothold at City Point."<sup>49</sup>

On 23 May, the inspection team recommended that Butler's force not be diminished, as the proper use of Butler's army would aid Grant more than would the additional reinforcements for the Army of the Potomac that could be drawn from it.<sup>50</sup> But their report came too late, for Grant had already made his mind up to pull Smith and a large force north of the James River to reinforce the main effort.<sup>51</sup>

Grant's curious decision-making process in this instance may have been the result of intrigue conducted against Butler by Sheridan and Wilson after their arrival at Bermuda Hundred. Wilson wrote that he and Sheridan had concluded that Butler was accomplishing little with his army, and was not getting along with Gillmore and Smith, who happened to be a close friend of Wilson. The two cavalry leaders agreed to each write separate letters to friends on Grant's personal staff describing their observations and recommending Butler's relief in favor of Smith.<sup>52</sup> After rejoining the Army of the Potomac, Wilson visited Grant's headquarters to follow-up on the letters:

"Both Grant and Rawlins were deeply interested in what I told them of Butler's opportunities and of the unfortunate dissensions which marred the efficiency of his army. Rawlins had received my letter by courier and I have never doubted that the personal reports made made independently of each other by Sheridan and myself were influential in moving Grant a few days later to withdraw Smith's corps from Butler's column to reenforce his own army, between the Totopotomoy and the Chickahominy."<sup>53</sup>

The success of this intrigue offers a clear example of the weaknesses in Grant's system of command relationships. The western officers Grant brought with him to the east at times undermined the formal command relationships to the detriment of the Union cause.

The army began crossing the Pamunkey River on 27 May, and by the next day the crossing was completed, except for the wagon train and Burnside's IX Corps which was providing security. Screened by Sheridan's Cavalry Corps, Grant moved towards Richmond in two columns, with Wright's VI Corps followed by Hancock's II Corps on the right, and Warren's V Corps followed by Burnside's IX Corps on the left.<sup>54</sup> There was skirmishing and a sharp cavalry engagement at Haw's Shop as both armies tried to locate the other. On 29 May, Grant found the Army of Northern Virginia securely entrenched along a ten mile front behind the Totopotomoy Creek. Lee had once again marched his nimble army along interior lines to block Grant's flanking movement. Grant found the position to be strong, and rather than making a serious attack against it, he elected to attempt another movement around Lee's right flank.

Sheridan's Cavalry Corps on the Union left flank initiated the Cold Harbor Operation by moving off to the southeast and seizing Cold Harbor on 31 May. This action was intended to prevent Lee from striking isolated Union reinforcements advancing from White House on the Pamunkey River, fifteen miles to the east.<sup>55</sup> Smith began arriving there on 30 May with his XVIII Corps from Butler's Army of the James. Sheridan held Cold Harbor against attacks on 1 June by Anderson's recently reinforced I Corps. The arrival of Wright's VI Corps, and Smith's XVIII Corps enabled an attack late in the afternoon. This attack captured several hundred prisoners, but did not penetrate the Confederate position. Both armies shifted to Cold Harbor, setting the stage for Grant's most controversial decision--his frontal assault of 3 June 1864.

The Army of Northern Virginia was entrenched along a line some seven miles in length, with the left flank resting on the Totopotomoy Creek and the right flank anchored on the Chickahominy. Anderson's I Corps held the center of the line, with Hill's III Corps on the right and the II Corps, again commanded by Early, on the left. Lee had been reinforced to a strength of nearly 60,000 men.<sup>56</sup> The Army of the Potomac was arrayed from north to south with Burnside's IX Corps on the right flank, Warren's V Corps, Smith's XVIII Corps, Wright's VI Corps, and Hancock's II Corps on the left flank. Grant had approximately 108,000 men available.<sup>57</sup> In a departure from

his earlier practice, Grant decided to place the responsibility for tactical command and control of the battle on Meade.<sup>58</sup> Meade was unable to properly deploy for the attack, and despite his concern about allowing the Confederates time to dig-in, he had to secure Grant's permission to delay the attack until the morning of 3 June.<sup>59</sup> The soldiers of the Army of the Potomac dreaded the next day's attack, and were described as "greatly depressed."<sup>60</sup> Porter described the preparation of some of the soldiers for the next day's attack:

"I noticed that many of the soldiers had taken off their coats, and seemed to be engaged in sewing up rents in them. This exhibition of tailoring seemed rather peculiar at such a moment, but upon closer examination it was found that the men were calmly writing their names and home addresses on slips of paper, and pinning them on the backs of their coats, so that their dead bodies might be recognized upon the field, and their fate made known to their families at home."<sup>61</sup>

At 0430 hours on 3 June, Meade massed 60,000 men on a frontage of 4,000 yards,<sup>62</sup> and launched Hancock's II Corps, Wright's VI Corps, and Smith's XVIII Corps in a massive assault against the center and right flank of Lee's entrenched line, with a supporting attack by Burnside's IX Corps on Lee's left flank. The result was a slaughter reminiscent of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Each corps attacked along diverging lines, and was enfiladed by fire and broken within the first few minutes.<sup>63</sup> Seven thousand Union soldiers were lost, at negligible cost to the Army of Northern Virginia.<sup>64</sup> Grant called off the attack, once he



understood the magnitude of the defeat.<sup>65</sup> Continual skirmishing continued until 12 June, foreshadowing the trench warfare of the Western Front in World War I, but Grant made no further attacks. The Cold Harbor Operation was over.

Grant's Cold Harbor Operation was a disaster. The losses during the period 22 May to 1 June had been comparatively light, totalling 3,986, including 591 killed, 2,734 wounded, and 661 missing. At Cold Harbor from 2 to 15 June, it was another story. The Official Records list 12,738 casualties, including 1,845 killed, 9,077 wounded, and 1,816 missing.<sup>66</sup> The losses sustained by the Army of Northern Virginia were relatively light by comparison. Grant regretted making the last assault at Cold Harbor:

"At Cold Harbor no advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained. Indeed, the advantages, other than those of relative losses, were on the Confederate side. Before that, the Army of Northern Virginia seemed to have acquired a wholesome regard for the courage, endurance, and soldierly qualities generally of the Army of the Potomac."<sup>67</sup>

At Cold Harbor, the flaws in Grant's system of command relationships contributed to the disaster. Grant had assumed tactical control of the fighting in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania, a responsibility that one would expect to see exercised by the army commander. At Cold Harbor, Grant seemed to suddenly change his approach and delegated tactical control to Meade. Meade wrote his wife the next day:

"I had immediate and entire command on the field all day, the Lieutenant General honoring the field with his presence only about one hour in the middle of the day."<sup>68</sup>

The attack itself was poorly organized, and was conducted without benefit of ground reconnaissance by either Grant or Meade.<sup>69</sup> Meade did give orders for corps and division commanders to conduct reconnaissance in their sectors,<sup>70</sup> but only a careful inspection of the Confederate fortifications by the army commander or Grant might have resulted in the cancellation of the hopeless assault. Essentially, the plan called for little more than each corps commander pitching into the Confederate fortifications to their front, in the hope that somewhere there would be a penetration.

Grant seems to have misjudged the condition of the Army of Northern Virginia as a result of Lee's failure to take advantage of his vulnerable positions at North Anna, being unaware of Lee's illness. In a 26 May letter to Halleck, Grant had stated that, "Lee's army is really whipped"<sup>71</sup> Porter pointed out that Union frontal attacks had succeeded at Chattanooga, Spotsylvania and other places under similar unfavorable circumstances. A breakthrough here offered such great potential results that an attempt seemed to be the wise thing to do at the time. Such a breakthrough might have enabled Grant to defeat Lee outside of the Richmond fortifications, capture the Confederate capital without a siege, and put the government to

flight.<sup>72</sup> Foote noted the total lack of Confederate reserves to respond to any penetration along Lee's extended frontage.<sup>73</sup> Swinton believed that a penetration might have been made had the attack focused on an exposed salient at a point in the line known as Watt's Hill, but that the importance of this piece of terrain was not realized.<sup>74</sup> There might have been some prospects for success had the attack gone in on 2 June, before Lee had sufficient time to thoroughly entrench,<sup>75</sup> but the results of an attack on 3 June should have been predictable.

Two other reasons have been advanced to justify Grant's decision to attack at Cold Harbor. The weakening political support for the war in the North seemed to call for extraordinary action to end the war as rapidly as possible, and the lack of assailable flanks in Lee's positions left a frontal assault as the only apparent means of achieving quick results.<sup>76</sup> Fuller concluded that Grant's decision to conduct a frontal assault was appropriate in light of the political situation, but that the execution of the attack was "faulty in the extreme."<sup>77</sup> The sickly summer season was approaching, and an extended campaign in that part of the country promised potentially heavy losses of men due to sickness over the coming months, much as the Army of the Potomac had experienced during McClellan's Peninsula Campaign in 1862.<sup>78</sup> With hindsight, the catastrophic losses actually suffered in the attack added greatly to war weariness in the North, and exceeded

any possible losses to "Chickahominy Fever" that might have been sustained in the malarial swamps.

Grant's employment of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps during the Cold Harbor Operation was particularly noteworthy, and he demonstrated the great advantage that this arm could provide his army. The cavalry conducted feints and demonstrations to confuse Lee, conducted reconnaissance, screened the flanks and front of the army, and seized and held key objectives ahead of the infantry. A similar use of Sheridan's Cavalry Corps during the Spotsylvania Operation might well have yielded decisive results that could have prevented the slaughter at Cold Harbor.

Grant's decision to pull Smith's XVIII Corps from Butler's Army of the James to reinforce the Army of the Potomac was clearly an error. The advice of his western officers, particularly Wilson and Sheridan, poorly served Grant in this instance. Confusing orders prevented these reinforcements from arriving at Cold Harbor in a timely manner, as they ended up conducting a long and exhausting march around the Virginia countryside. The Army of the James was actually holding down more Confederate forces than Grant had given it credit for, some 20,000 until 18 May and substantial numbers even until the end of May,<sup>79</sup> and they were able to reinforce Lee as soon as Butler sent Smith off to the north. At the time Grant pulled Smith's XVIII Corps from the Army of the James, Butler was in the

process of a major operation to cross the Appomattox River and attacking Petersburg--an attack that might well have succeeded.<sup>80</sup> Smith and the men of his XVIII Corps had a terrible experience assaulting the Army of Northern Virginia's entrenchments at Cold Harbor. That experience would later contribute to their hesitation at Petersburg, when they might have broken through weakly held Confederate lines and achieved a decisive victory.<sup>81</sup> Grant would have been better off leaving Smith's XVIII Corps with the Army of the James.

Marshall-Cornwall felt that the Union assault at Cold Harbor was handicapped by a shortage of artillery support. By this time, Grant had reduced the size of his field artillery train by nearly half in order to lessen the logistical demands this arm made and accelerate his movements. Marshall-Cornwall concluded that the additional firepower of the absent artillery might have enabled the Army of the Potomac to blast a hole in the Confederate defenses.<sup>82</sup> It is difficult to accept this theory in light of the relative lack of offensive effectiveness of the artillery of the day against entrenchments.

At this point, Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia must be considered a failure. Grant succeeded in achieving his aim of fixing Lee on the defensive, but it had been at the cost of some 53,000 casualties.<sup>83</sup> Such losses were unprecedented, and it was a cost in blood that stunned the North.<sup>84</sup> Catton summarized the campaign through early June:

"Never had armies fought like this. For a solid month they had not been out of contact. Every day, somewhere along the lines, there had been action. During this month Union losses had averaged two thousand men every single day. Old formations had been wrecked. Generals had been killed...and no soldier had bathed, changed his clothing, or had an unbroken<sup>85</sup> night's sleep for more than four agonizing weeks."

Grant had attempted to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia with a combination of frontal assaults and enveloping movements around Lee's right flank, but each one of these attempts had failed:<sup>86</sup>

"The incessant movements, day and night, for so long a period, the constant close contact with the enemy during all that time, the almost daily assaults upon intrenchments having entanglements in front, and defended by artillery and musketry in front and flank, exhausted officers and men. The larger part of the officers, who literally led their commands, were killed or wounded, and a large number of those that filled the ranks at the beginning of the campaign were absent."<sup>87</sup>

Criticism of Grant was mounting in the North,<sup>88</sup> and the losses at Cold Harbor sapped the spirit of both the army and the public.<sup>89</sup> Some of the troops had refused to obey orders to make additional charges against the Confederate entrenchments after the initial repulse.<sup>90</sup> Repeated orders to charge again were disobeyed, and the fire was merely intensified instead.<sup>91</sup> Porter angrily denied that this was true:

"It has been stated by inimical critics that the men had become demoralized by the many assaults in which they had been engaged; that they had lost much of their spirit, and were even insubordinate, refusing to move against the earthworks in obedience to the orders of their immediate commanders. This is a gross slander upon the troops, who were as gallant and subordinate as any

forces in the history of modern warfare, although it is true that many of the veterans had fallen, and that the recruits who replaced them were inferior in fighting qualities."<sup>92</sup>

Porter's position on Grant's personal staff placed him away from the front lines at Cold Harbor, and he is almost certainly in error. Prisoners captured by the Confederates complained bitterly about the "useless butchery."<sup>93</sup> Even Smith wrote later that he refused to obey orders from Meade to launch another assault with his XVIII Corps.<sup>94</sup> The morale and discipline of the Army of the Potomac was badly shaken by the useless slaughter at Cold Harbor. In a 5 June letter, Emory Upton was scathing in his criticism:

"I am very sorry to say I have seen but little generalship during the campaign. Some of our corps commanders are not fit to be corporals. Lazy and indolent, they will not even ride along their lines; yet, without hesitancy, they will order us to attack the enemy, no matter what their position or numbers."<sup>95</sup>

Upton was accurate in his assessment, for the senior leadership of the Army of the Potomac was sadly deficient at Cold Harbor. Meade's indifferent performance was evident in his newly restored status as tactical commander on the field. It is doubtful whether Meade was secure enough in his position to present the case to Grant for not making the pointless attack at all, even if he had been sufficiently perceptive to realize the true situation. In view of the lack of clarity in his system of command relationships, only Grant's direct personal leadership at the front might have prevented disaster.

Northern newspaper coverage in the early part of Grant's Overland Campaign was far too optimistic about the prospects for success. Indeed, a 23 May *Chicago Tribune* story raised concerns over the false hopes that such over optimistic reporting was raising among the people.<sup>96</sup> An "angry and grieving" North grew disillusioned with Grant after Cold Harbor.<sup>97</sup> Newspapers which had praised Grant lavishly after his earlier victories now branded him a "butcher", and the morale of the Confederacy rose to its greatest level since Lee's spectacular victory in the Chancellorsville Campaign two years earlier.<sup>98</sup>

Relations between the press corps and senior military commanders became more strained after Cold Harbor. The reporters tended to take sides in the controversies among the various personalities within the army. Meade suffered the worst from this, after a 2 June story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* falsely reported that Meade had wanted to retreat after the Wilderness fighting. The excitable Meade was infuriated, and ran the reporter out of camp in a particularly humiliating manner. In a Washington meeting, a group of correspondents decided to retaliate in an organized manner:

"At this meeting it was agreed General Meade's name should never be mentioned again in dispatches by any of the newspaper correspondents present except in connection with a defeat. All future successes of the Army of the Potomac were to be attributed to General Grant, and if a general order was issued it was understood that Meade's name was to be excised before publication."<sup>99</sup>



Grant was gravely disappointed with the failure at Cold Harbor and the increasing crescendo of criticism he received in the press, and yet he was a man who was almost imperturbable in times of crisis and adversity. Out of the depths of the despair after Cold Harbor, Grant conceived a daring and brilliant operation to redeem the failures his campaign had suffered to date.

On 5 June, two days after the great assault at Cold Harbor, Grant wrote a letter to Halleck in which he summarized the military situation, and outlined his plan for the next phase of the campaign. Grant concluded that he could not accomplish all that he had intended outside of Richmond without a greater sacrifice of life than he was willing to make. He had decided to transfer his army to the south side of the James River to cut the main Confederate supply lines running through Petersburg to Richmond. Prior to making this move, he intended to have his cavalry destroy a long stretch of the Virginia Central Railroad, which would isolate Richmond from the rich Shenandoah Valley to the northwest.<sup>100</sup> This was a bold plan. It involved substantial risks, and would require careful security measures to execute:

"Grant was going to break contact with the watchful Lee and march undetected into Lee's rear, moving through Lee's own spies. To do this he must march 50 miles through swamps and across two rivers--including the half-mile-wide James--always risking attack from that masterly commander whose favorite tactic was to strike an army on the move."<sup>101</sup>

On 7 June, Grant sent Sheridan with two divisions from his Cavalry Corps to tear up the Virginia Central Railroad to the northwest of Richmond.<sup>102</sup> On 9 June he began preparing fortifications to the left rear of his lines at Cold Harbor to shield the movement of his army.<sup>103</sup> Grant wrote Butler on 11 June, informing him that the Army of the James had priority for reinforcements and that he should expect the return of Smith's XVIII Corps to Bermuda Hundred by water transport on the night of 14 June. Grant instructed Butler to cross Smith's Corps from Bermuda Hundred to seize Petersburg.<sup>104</sup>

The Army of the Potomac began its march after dark on 12 June under the cloak of pervasive operations security measures.<sup>105</sup> Smith's XVIII Corps marched towards White House on the Pamunkey River, where it was to embark on steamers for Bermuda Hundred on 13 June. The movement south was led by cavalry, which seized crossing points over the Chickahominy River for the emplacement of pontoon bridges. The cavalry was followed by Warren's V Corps marching toward Long Bridge. Burnside's IX Corps marched on a separate route toward Jones' Bridge, four miles to the east. Hancock's II Corps and Wright's VI Corps occupied the second line of fortifications to the rear, covering the army's withdrawal from the Cold Harbor lines. As the roads cleared, these two corps followed on the march south.<sup>106</sup>

Warren's V Corps and a cavalry division crossed the river and swung over to the west to establish a blocking

position between the Chickahominy and James Rivers. The rest of the army reached the James River on 13 and 14 June.<sup>107</sup> Beginning at 1600 hours that afternoon, Grant's engineers began laying a pontoon bridge over the James River. This was a formidable task, as the crossing site was 2,100 feet wide, and the bridge had to resist a strong current and a four-foot rise and fall with the tides. Amazingly, the bridge was completed in just eight hours:<sup>108</sup>

"In all, 101 pontoons were used and the roadway had a width of 13 feet. It was one of the greatest pontoon bridges of history, and may rank with those by which Xerxes crossed the Hellespont in 480 B.C. and Napoleon the Danube below Vienna in 1809."<sup>109</sup>

Lee was unaware of Grant's intentions at the time. He discovered the withdrawal from Cold Harbor on the morning of 13 June, but seems to have assumed that the Army of the Potomac was merely conducting a flanking movement to approach Richmond south of the Chickahominy River. He dispatched Early's II Corps to the Shenandoah Valley,<sup>110</sup> and moved the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia to new positions between the Chickahominy and James Rivers. The screen of Union cavalry in front of his positions here prevented him from ascertaining Grant's actual movements across the James River.<sup>111</sup>

Grant ferried Hancock's IInd Corps across the James River on 14 and 15 June.<sup>112</sup> Burnside's IX Corps and Warren's V Corps crossed the pontoon bridge on 15 and 16 June, and Wright's VI Corps and the cavalry followed on 16 June. The movement was a difficult one, but was handled

with precision and skill.<sup>113</sup> Grant had no evidence that Lee was moving troops south of Richmond by 14 June, and he was confident that he had good prospects for seizing Petersburg before it could be reinforced.<sup>114</sup> He had stolen a march on the Army of Northern Virginia, and had "out-generaled Lee completely".<sup>115</sup>

Despite the frightful losses sustained by the Army of the Potomac during the campaign thus far, its strength was approximately the same as it had been before crossing the Rapidan River. Halleck had managed to forward more than 55,000 reinforcements, exclusive of those sent to Butler. But Halleck cautioned Grant that there were few resources left to replace future losses of the armies in the field.<sup>116</sup>

Smith's reinforced XVIII Corps crossed the Appomattox River from Bermuda Hundred on 15 June and approached Petersburg. Petersburg was protected by the "Dimmock Line":

"The Petersburg fortifications were ten miles in length, a half oval tied at its ends to Appomattox above and below the town, and contained in all some 55 redans, square forts bristling with batteries and connected by six-foot breastworks, twenty feet thick at the base and rimmed by a continuous ditch, another six feet deep and fifteen wide. In front of this dusty moat, trees had been felled, their branches sharpened and interlaced to discourage attackers, and on beyond a line of rifle pits for skirmishers, who could fall back through narrow gaps in the abatis, the ground had been cleared for half a mile to afford the defenders an unobstructed field of fire that would have to be crossed, naked to whatever lead might fly, by whatever moved against them."<sup>117</sup>

The fortifications were immensely strong, but they were thinly manned by a pick-up Confederate force commanded by General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, and Smith enjoyed nearly a four-to-one advantage in numbers. Smith drove back some Confederate skirmishers, but then spent more than six hours conducting a reconnaissance of the fortifications. He finally moved against the works at 1900 hours in a feeble attack, and he called the attack off after some minor gains.<sup>118</sup>

Grant had intended for Hancock to support Smith's attack with his II Corps, but confusion as to Grant's intent and poor maps prevented Hancock's support from arriving in a timely manner. At 1000 hours on 14 June, Meade ordered Hancock to wait at Wind Mill Point on the James River for 60,000 rations. He was then to march on the most direct route to Petersburg and halt at the point where the City Point railroad crossed Harrison's Creek.<sup>119</sup> In a letter to Butler instructing him to provide the rations, Grant noted that Hancock would halt after making his move, and would not advance further until new orders were received. No indication was given that he intended for Hancock to move rapidly to assist Smith in his critical assault against Petersburg on 15 June, but rather that he would merely be available to reinforce if Smith requested him to do so.<sup>120</sup>

The rations for Hancock did not arrive at first light, but were delayed until 1030 hours. Meade had

approved of Hancock waiting there for the rations, indicating that he knew nothing of Grant's intent.<sup>121</sup> Hancock then marched his II Corps towards the point indicated on his map, but found the map to be in error, as he noted in a message to Humphreys at 1530 hours.<sup>122</sup> Cleaves blamed Butler for the bad maps and accused him of deliberately delaying the sending of Hancock's rations.<sup>123</sup> These unsupported charges by Cleaves seem to be unfair to Butler.

While marching toward Smith, Hancock received messages from both Grant and Smith at 1725 hours that urged him to rush to the assistance of XVIII Corps for the assault.<sup>124</sup> This was the first knowledge Hancock had that he was to attack Petersburg on 15 June. Hancock stated later that he could have arrived to his attack positions at 1600 hours if he had understood Grant's intent.<sup>125</sup> Throughout the campaign, Hancock had proven himself to be the finest corps commander in the Eastern Theater. Had he received proper instructions, Hancock would almost certainly have arrived in a timely manner and seized Petersburg on 15 June.

Grant was determined to try again to take Petersburg before it could be reinforced. He sent Meade forward to personally command the attack on 16 June.<sup>126</sup> Meade moved Burnside's IX Corps to Hancock's left.<sup>127</sup> Meade ordered an attack at 1800 hours with 48,000 men, with Smith's XVIII Corps in the north, Hancock's II Corps in the center, and

Burnside's IX Corps in the south.<sup>128</sup> The attack was conducted in a piecemeal manner, and Beauregard, who had been reinforced to a strength of 14,000 men, was able to stop the assault.<sup>129</sup> Both Hancock and Meade noted that the men simply did not attack with the same persistence and vigor that had characterized the Army of the Potomac's previous battles.<sup>130</sup>

Grant wanted further attacks on 17 June, but delegated authority to Meade to decide how hard to push the assault.<sup>131</sup> The next day, Burnside's IX Corps conducted a successful surprise attack in the early morning, but the major Union assault was delayed until 18 June.<sup>132</sup> Beauregard was urgently requesting reinforcements from Lee throughout this period, but Lee was still uncertain of Grant's dispositions, and did not dispatch any support until late on 17 June.<sup>133</sup>

Grant ordered a massive assault at 0400 hours on 18 June with some 95,000 men against Beauregard's 20,000. Meade ordered elements of Smith's XVIII Corps and Wright's VI Corps, General David B. Birney's II Corps (Birney commanding due to Hancock's incapacitation), Burnside's IX Corps, and Warren's V Corps to attack in line from north to south.<sup>134</sup> The assault rolled in against the Confederate positions, but they found the works to be abandoned. Beauregard had artfully pulled his forces back to a second and shorter line of entrenchments a mile to the rear, which he had hastily begun preparing the day before. The Army of

the Potomac had struck a pocket of air, and quickly became disorganized and confused. It took until 1400 hours before a determined attack could be mounted against the newly discovered Confederate line by Birney's II Corps, Burnside's IX Corps, and Warren's V Corps. Beauregard had by then been reinforced to some 38,000 men. This second attack was repelled with heavy loss.<sup>135</sup>

Grant suspended further frontal attacks against the Confederate lines later that day, and informed Meade that he was "perfectly satisfied" that all that could have been done had been done. He ordered Meade to dig in.<sup>136</sup> The armies stood in place improving their entrenchments until 22 June, when Grant made one more attempt to decide the issue. He decided to maneuver rather than conduct additional frontal assaults.<sup>137</sup> He pulled Birney's II Corps and Wright's VI Corps out of the line on 21 June, and on the next day he attempted to turn Lee's right flank and strike at the Weldon and Southside Railroads.<sup>138</sup> The two corps had difficulty moving through the dense forests, and Lee surprised the force with a sharp counterattack by Hill's II Corps, driving the attack back in confusion.<sup>139</sup> Grant said "The affair was a stampede and surprise to both parties that ought to have been turned in our favor."<sup>140</sup> After this maneuver, both sides settled down to protracted siege warfare that would last until the following spring. Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia was over.



The Petersburg Operation was another bitter disappointment to Grant. The maneuver out of the Cold Harbor position across the James River was unquestionably brilliant. It was a textbook example of the value of bold and unexpected maneuver in the face of the enemy, and had set the stage for the seizure of the lightly defended entrenchments at Petersburg. Success would have rendered a further defense of Richmond untenable by cutting its vital supply lines. Grant believed that Petersburg could easily have been taken on 15 June, and this conviction was shared by Marshall-Cornwall, Catton, Fuller, Leckie, Livermore, and Williams.<sup>141</sup> Even Beauregard believed that a determined assault could have carried his works, as he was so badly outnumbered.<sup>142</sup> Smith's lack of resolve has received the harshest criticism:

"The most blameworthy of the Union commanders, however, was William Farrar Smith, who was given the fleeting opportunity of seizing Petersburg before it was reinforced. There was no excuse for his dilatory and pusillanimous conduct. Butler had lent him Kautz's cavalry division to assist him in reconnaissance duties, but he made no use of it. He was evidently suffering from 'cold feet' after his experiences at Cold Harbor, and dallied all day in the hope that Hancock would arrive to carry out the assault."<sup>143</sup>

The Senate had been reluctant to confirm Grant's recommended promotion of Smith to Major General after the Battle of Chattanooga, and Grant ruefully noted that, "I was not long in finding out that the objections to Smith's promotion were well founded."<sup>144</sup> Grant was certain that had Hancock's orders been properly transmitted to him, he

would have been there to lead the assault on 15 June, and that he could have carried the Confederate works and gain decisive results.<sup>145</sup> Great credit must be given to the desperate defense conducted by Beauregard, "a brilliant subordinate, a soldier who has never received full justice."<sup>146</sup> But for Beauregard, Grant might have succeeded in concluding his campaign with a significant victory that would essentially have ended the war.

The dismal failures of the assaults on 16, 17, and 18 June must be blamed in large measure on Meade. Meade wrote that he had been in "exclusive command" during this entire period, and that Grant had only been present on the field for half an hour on 17 June.<sup>147</sup> On 19 June and 7 July, Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana reported to the Secretary of War that although the men fought well, they were not directed with the same skill and enthusiasm due to the heavy losses of senior officers previously sustained by the Army of the Potomac. He criticized Meade for his inability to secure the cooperation of his corps commanders. Dana passed on Warren's comments that Meade conducted the attacks "without brains and generalship." Meade's vile temper made him extremely difficult to work for, and Dana indicated that Grant was considering relieving him of command.<sup>148</sup> This lack of cooperation was evident not only in the obvious confusion of the 18 June attack after it struck the empty Confederate works, but

also in a message Meade sent to Burnside and Warren at 1420 hours:

"I am greatly astonished by your dispatch of 2 p.m. What additional orders to attack you require I cannot imagine. My orders have been explicit and are now repeated, that you each immediately assault the enemy with all your force, and if there is any further delay the responsibility for the failure and the consequences will rest with you."<sup>149</sup>

Clearly Meade must bear much of the responsibility for the failures of his army to take Petersburg.

The repeated and costly assaults against fortifications over the previous six weeks had caused a reluctance on the part of the officers and men of the Army of the Potomac to press the Petersburg attacks home with the same elan and ferocity they had demonstrated in the past, as noted by both Meade and Hancock.<sup>150</sup> This conclusion was shared by Porter, Esposito, Catton, and Foote.<sup>151</sup> The soldiers had wanted to attack on the night of 15 June in the moonlight, for they knew their best chance was before the Confederates had time to reinforce their position, and their rage at the delay led to "blood-curdling blasphemy" directed against their leadership.<sup>152</sup> In view of the exhausting nature of the campaign, and the loss of tens of thousands of the best and bravest of the officers and men, it is understandable that there would have been some loss of offensive fighting spirit, particularly when much of their sacrifice seemed to be in vain. But the blame for the failures of the Petersburg Operation must be assigned to the army's senior leadership,

and cannot be attributed to a lack of courage among the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac.

Had Grant taken personal charge of the critical attack on Petersburg, the results might have been different.<sup>153</sup> He seemed to maintain a "curious hands-off attitude"<sup>154</sup> at a time when his presence was needed most. Part of the explanation for this may be the confusing command relationships of the Army of the Potomac, with the General in Chief accompanying an army in the field. Neither Grant nor Meade had clear responsibility for supervising the tactical operations of the army.<sup>155</sup> At times during the early part of the campaign, Grant took direct control of the fighting, usurping what might be thought of as the responsibility of Meade as the army commander. At other times later in the campaign, he suddenly reversed his previous practice by delegating tactical control to Meade. The very fact that it seemed to take explicit instructions from Grant to get Meade at the front to take command of his army on 16 June makes it evident that some real confusion existed in Meade's mind as to the role he was expected to play. Grant backed off of his detailed direct control of the assaults at both Cold Harbor and Petersburg, but Meade was unable to effectively take his place. The attacks on Petersburg were instances when Grant certainly should have exercised direct personal leadership, for he might have won a great victory.

Grant began the Petersburg Operation with a daring maneuver that has been characterized as "one of the most audacious and difficult operations of war ever attempted."<sup>156</sup> Under conditions of extreme adversity after the disastrous assault of 3 June, Grant faced what might have been the most severe crisis of the war with determination and moral courage. His brilliant maneuver out of the Cold Harbor entrenchments and across the James River presented the Army of the Potomac with a fleeting chance for winning a great victory. Grant had finally succeeded in surprising Lee with his unexpected movement, but the temporary military advantage that had been gained was squandered, largely because of weaknesses in his command and control system. Ultimate victory was assured by the successes that were gained as a result of the Petersburg Operation, but the Civil War would go on for ten more long months.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Grant ended his campaign without gaining the decisive strategic victory he sought to end the Civil War in the summer of 1864. He came close on several occasions, but those opportunities for a decisive victory were lost due to the extraordinary performance of the Confederate forces, the fortunes of war, the power of an entrenched defender, and mistakes made by Grant. These mistakes were made at both the tactical and operational levels, and in many cases these mistakes were exacerbated by weaknesses in the system of command relationships established in the east. While the accomplishments of Grant's 1864 Campaign in Virginia at the operational level did set the stage for an inevitable final victory, he might well have achieved a decisive strategic victory ending the war in the summer of 1864 if he had successfully resolved the weaknesses in his system of command relationships.

There were nine major errors that Grant made during his Overland Campaign. He failed to establish a fully effective system of command relationships. He assigned Richmond as the objective for Butler's Army of the James, rather than Petersburg. He became decisively engaged in the Wilderness under circumstances unfavorable to his army. He sent Sheridan's entire Cavalry Corps on a deep raid

during the critical fighting at Spotsylvania. He failed to exploit the potential of Hancock's initial flanking movement at Spotsylvania. He pulled the XVIII Corps away from the Army of the James at a critical time to throw it against Confederate entrenchments at Cold Harbor. He launched pointless assaults at Cold Harbor without benefit of proper reconnaissance or coordination, wasting thousands of lives. He failed to take Petersburg after crossing the James River at a time when it was virtually defenseless. He failed to operate with a full appreciation of the defensive strength of entrenched infantry armed with the rifled musket, and, at least initially, he failed to properly employ his cavalry. An examination of these nine mistakes can provide an explanation of why Grant was unable to achieve a decisive victory in his campaign and thereby end the Civil War in the summer of 1864.

Grant's failure to establish an effective system of command relationships was the most significant of his nine major mistakes, for it either caused or exacerbated the adverse impact of the other eight. The fact that Grant made mistakes should not obscure the remarkable military accomplishments that he did achieve under extraordinarily difficult circumstances:

"From his camps north of the Rapidan, in a little over a month, he fought his way through a hundred miles of most difficult country; he crossed three rivers in the face of the enemy; he made nine flanking movements; he changed his base of supplies four times, fed his army, sheltered it and transported his sick and wounded to the rear.

He moved forward 4,000 wagons and an immense train of reserve artillery without the loss of a gun, a wagon or an animal captured by the enemy, and he was never once surprised or compelled to halt for more than a few days at a time."<sup>1</sup>

Yet he might have accomplished so much more, but for the fact that the system of command relationships that Grant established simply did not work effectively. This was primarily a problem within the Army of the Potomac since Grant accompanied it in the field, but also manifested itself in the subordinates Grant selected for Butler in the Army of the James. Had Grant been able to successfully resolve the weaknesses in the roles and relationships of his key subordinates, it is likely that he could have avoided or at least mitigated the effects of enough of his other mistakes to have achieved a decisive victory in the summer of 1864.

Grant's concept was that he would locate his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac, but that Meade was to exercise actual command of the army. He intended to make Meade's position the same as the other army commanders by passing all his orders to the subordinate corps through Meade, and he located his headquarters near Meade's for that purpose.<sup>2</sup> He considered Meade to be both "capable and perfectly subordinate," and believed that Meade could attend to the details of running the army. Grant would then be free to do the strategic planning.<sup>3</sup> For his part, Meade intended to give Grant his "heartiest cooperation".<sup>4</sup> Such a command system recognized the fact that Grant was

actually responsible for managing the activities of the entire 533,000 man Union Army.

The reality that developed once the campaign began was that Grant spent only limited time discharging his responsibilities as General in Chief, and he spent a lot of time during the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and North Anna Operations directing the tactical movement and combat of the Army of the Potomac. Steere summarized the effect of Grant locating his headquarters with that of Meade:

"...Meade soon encountered encroachments of another sort on his authority as an independent army commander. With its lack of corporate experience, the very proximity of general headquarters gave rise to a curious kind of dual command--one that was studiously ignored in all official correspondence, but frankly accepted in fact."<sup>5</sup>

Grant directly controlled the movements of Burnside's IX Corps at all times until finally placing it under Meade's command on 26 May.<sup>6</sup> At Cold Harbor and Petersburg, Grant suddenly thrust the responsibility for direct command on the battlefield back onto Meade, who handled the responsibility badly. Confusion resulting from this arrangement hampered operations during the campaign. Grant himself noted that, "Meade's position afterwards proved embarrassing to me if not to him."<sup>7</sup> Porter believed that Meade "manifested an excellent spirit through all the embarrassments which his position at times entailed,"<sup>8</sup> but Porter's comments reveal a lack of appreciation for the size of Meade's ego. When he first learned in March that



Grant would be accompanying his army in the field, Meade lamented to his wife that "you may look now for the Army of the Potomac putting laurels on the brow of another rather than your husband." Meade's concern for receiving proper credit was a constant theme in his letters during the campaign. By 23 May, Meade concluded that "it is idle to deny that my position is a very unjust one."<sup>9</sup> Meade's explosion after reading the 2 June *Philadelphia Inquirer* story claiming that he had counseled retreat in the Wilderness<sup>10</sup> was an indication of the frustration that he was feeling in his position. The faulty command arrangements was a demonstrable weakness in the army:

"I think I am warranted in saying that this arrangement worked badly. Neither General Grant nor General Meade had his full share of responsibility for the conduct of the operations; neither officer carried the full amount of the legitimate responsibility of a general commanding an army."<sup>11</sup>

A different weakness in the system of command relationships plagued the Army of the James. Butler was a political general who possessed considerable administrative skills, but was without formal military training or practical experience leading a large army in combat.<sup>12</sup> Grant recognized the political necessity of keeping Butler in command, and decided to provide him reliable and experienced professional soldiers to serve as corps commanders under him. This was a fine plan, but Grant greatly overestimated the military ability of Smith--whom he knew from the Western Theater--and Gillmore. The

selection of these two ineffective officers to assist Butler was to dim the bright prospects for a major contribution to the campaign from the Army of the James.

In his operational plan, Grant intended to have the Army of the James tie down Confederate troops that might otherwise be used to reinforce Lee, disrupt Confederate supply lines, and cooperate with the Army of the Potomac against Richmond. This selection of Richmond as the geographical objective was the principle reason that Butler failed to take Petersburg when it might have been easily accomplished early in the campaign.<sup>13</sup> Butler's failure to deviate from his instructions and seize Petersburg when the opportunity presented itself, or at least to strongly recommend to Grant that such an action be taken can be partially attributed to weaknesses in the command system established by Grant. Had Grant assigned a more competent professional soldier to the Army of the James, then Butler might have received solid advice to enable him to take advantage of the opportunities he was presented with.

Grant certainly made a number of mistakes in his tactical handling of the Army of the Potomac, beginning in the Wilderness on the first day of the campaign, and those mistakes resulted in a high cost in blood. He should have avoided battle in the Wilderness, for the terrain greatly favored the Army of Northern Virginia by nullifying virtually every advantage possessed by the Army of the Potomac. Grant should have rapidly marched his army through

the Wilderness on 4 May, and fought the first engagement with Lee in the less restricted terrain beyond. While it is true that Grant came close to shattering Lee's right flank and perhaps winning a significant victory with Hancock's attack in the early morning of 6 May, it is also true that had Ewell moved to envelop the Union right flank at the same time that Longstreet was rolling the Union left flank back to the Brock Road, then Grant might have faced disaster.<sup>14</sup> While the actual decision to halt in the Wilderness cannot be attributed to weaknesses in the system of command relationships, the problems of a divided command began to become apparent, particularly the difficulties of coordinating the movements of Burnside's IX Corps with the Army of the Potomac.<sup>15</sup> By stopping in the midst of the Wilderness, Grant exposed his army to the possibility of defeat, with serious consequences for the Union cause.

Grant made two mistakes in the Spotsylvania Operation, one of which can be directly attributed to weaknesses in the Army of the Potomac's command relationships. On 9 May, Sheridan took his entire Cavalry Corps on a deep raid towards Richmond.<sup>16</sup> Grant later cited many objectives for this raid, and professed great satisfaction with its results,<sup>17</sup> but an important reason for authorizing it appears to have been the heated conflict that had erupted over what Steere called Sheridan's "mishandling" of the Cavalry Corps in the movement from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania.<sup>18</sup> Under Grant's system of

command relationships, Meade was not only frequently denied tactical control of the army he commanded, but he was saddled with a subordinate whose special relationship with the General in Chief permitted him to be insubordinate to Meade with impunity. When Meade raised the issue of Sheridan's insubordination and the conflict over the proper role of cavalry, Grant promptly sided with Sheridan and Meade had to authorize the raid.<sup>19</sup> This decision not only failed to resolve the conflict and clarify Meade's status, but it denied Grant the services of nearly the whole of his cavalry arm at Spotsylvania. Grant surrendered one of his most important advantages by sending Sheridan's Cavalry Corps away from the Army of the Potomac at a critical time. The effective use of that arm could have given Grant the reconnaissance he badly needed, and permitted effective turning movements against Lee's flanks. This was the single most serious error Grant made during his campaign.

On 10 May, Grant made his second mistake when he recalled Hancock from a promising maneuver ordered by Meade against the Confederate left flank in order to make a frontal assault.<sup>18</sup> This sudden reversal of Meade's orders may have been a result of conflicts caused by the poorly defined command relationship between Grant and Meade that gave the Army of the Potomac a sort of dual command structure. However, an examination of the available evidence fails to reveal whether Hancock's flanking

movement was actually Meade's idea or Grant's--so any conclusion remains speculative. Had Grant initiated this movement early on 10 May rather than late on 9 May, or allowed Hancock to continue his maneuver, Lee might have been turned out of his formidable field fortifications and forced to fight in the open. It should be noted that despite the advantages that could have been gained by operating against Lee's flanks, Grant was able to break through the center of the Confederate line on 12 May, and again came very close to breaking the Army of Northern Virginia in two and routing it. Spotsylvania remains a battle of lost opportunities, and represented Grant's best opportunity to achieve a decisive strategic victory and end the war in the summer of 1864.

The decision to pull Smith's XVIII Corps from the Army of the James to join the Army of the Potomac at Cold Harbor was another mistake, and one that can be at least partially attributed to weaknesses in Grant's system of command relationships. Grant's decision to pull substantial forces from Butler appears to have been a result of intrigue against Butler by Wilson and Sheridan. By virtue of their successful service with Grant in the west, these two officers enjoyed a special status that went far beyond their formal positions. They used that special status to undermine Butler in the eyes of Grant, and helped to convince him to withdraw most of the fighting strength of the Army of the James to reinforce the Army of the Potomac

at Cold Harbor.<sup>21</sup> The investigating team Grant sent to Bermuda Hundred to evaluate the situation there recommended that the Army of the James not be diminished,<sup>22</sup> and the fact that Grant rejected their findings lends credence to Wilson's explanation.

Smith's Corps added nothing to the limited prospects for successfully carrying Lee's fortifications at Cold Harbor, and the experience there later contributed to an evident reluctance to assault the lightly manned Confederate works at Petersburg. It also so weakened Butler's Army of the James that it was unable to take advantage of some very real prospects of seizing Petersburg in late May by crossing the Appomattox River from Bermuda Hundred. By removing Smith's XVIII Corps at a critical time in order to reinforce the Army of the Potomac, Grant accepted a stalemate below Richmond when positive results could have been achieved.<sup>23</sup>

The slaughter on 3 June at Cold Harbor was inexcusable, and can be partially attributed to the continuing confusion over just who was responsible for the tactical employment of the Army of the Potomac. The massive Union assault was poorly planned, consisting of little more than pitching into the Confederate fortifications all across the line, and was delayed beyond the point at which it stood any real chance of success. The failure of both Grant and Meade to conduct reconnaissance and properly plan the 3 June assault at Cold Harbor may be attributed to some

confusion as to who was really responsible for those functions. Grant turned the conduct of the battle over to Meade, in contrast with his earlier close control at the tactical level. Meade was either unable to fully grasp the hopelessness of the planned assault, or else did not feel secure enough in his uncertain role to attempt to talk Grant out of the attack.

The failure of the initial assault on Petersburg can be directly attributed to the weaknesses in Grant's command system. Grant's brilliant movement across the James River provided a fleeting opportunity for the Union to seize a lightly defended Petersburg on 15 June, but the opportunity was lost. The orders concerning Hancock's participation in the 15 June attack on Petersburg were confusing, and it seems clear that both Hancock and Meade did not understand Grant's intent.<sup>24</sup> Grant charged Meade with the responsibility to control the battle at Petersburg on 16 June, and Meade's inept performance was not up to the task.<sup>25</sup> This problem can be partially attributed to the unusual command relationship Grant had established between Meade and himself:

"It is impossible to explain or excuse the crass ineptitude of the Union leadership at Petersburg. Grant himself must take some of the responsibility. Having deprived Meade of any operational responsibility from the very start of the campaign, he suddenly threw the onus of command on him when the battle had already begun, and then left him to his own devices without any further guidance. Meade himself possessed little initiative or energy."<sup>26</sup>

The command relationship between Grant and Meade was still not fully resolved by the middle of June, and the resulting confusion cost the Army of the Potomac heavily.

Grant's frequent use of frontal attacks against Confederate field fortifications throughout the campaign seemed to reveal a certain lack of appreciation for the true difficulty of carrying such works at an acceptable cost. This observation has been made by numerous historians, including Fuller, Marshall-Cornwall, and Williams.<sup>27</sup> While it is true that Grant experienced some success with frontal attacks, including the 12 May assault against the "Mule Shoe", those successes were usually the result of special circumstances and some good fortune. Most frontal attacks were complete failures. Flanking attacks were generally far more effective--sometimes spectacularly so. Swinton believed that Grant realized his best successes when he departed from his principle of "hammering" the enemy and maneuvered as well as attacked.<sup>28</sup> The senior leadership of the Army of the Potomac did not appear to have made much effort to dissuade Grant from his frontal assaults, or to develop tactical opportunities against enemy flanks on their own. It is questionable whether these leaders felt secure enough in their relationships with Grant to question his battlefield tactics, whatever they may have thought. Certainly Meade's confidence in his status was never such that he could have objected to Grant's tactics. Still, Grant must bear the



responsibility for his tactics and his system of command relationships that discouraged any questioning of methods. Grant would likely have experienced more success had he used his numerical superiority to consistently operate against Lee's flanks on the battlefield.

Grant also initially failed to employ his cavalry to the maximum of its capabilities.<sup>29</sup> Infantry was the dominant arm in the Civil War, but the cavalry provided reconnaissance, screening, and advance guard support. This was especially important when invading enemy territory, as Grant was doing during the campaign. Cavalry could be effectively used to conduct deep raids against enemy lines of communication,<sup>30</sup> but it could also play an important role in operating against the flanks of a defensive position. This was particularly so with the Union cavalry because of the significant firepower advantage of their breech-loading and repeating rifles. A balance had to be achieved over the various missions that the cavalry was given. Steere criticized the employment of the Union cavalry in the Wilderness, where it failed to properly screen the army or provide strategic reconnaissance, as too much strength was devoted to guarding the wagon train.<sup>31</sup> Meade and Sheridan were at odds over the role of the cavalry,<sup>32</sup> and this disagreement developed into a serious personality conflict that adversely affected the campaign. Grant's dispatching of Sheridan's entire Cavalry Corps during the Spotsylvania Operation was at least partially a

result of this conflict, and that raid might never have occurred had the command relationship between Meade and Sheridan been resolved prior to the start of the campaign. Still, Grant must be admired for the manner in which he employed his cavalry during the Cold Harbor and Petersburg Operations.

The major errors Grant made during his campaign were either caused or exacerbated to varying degrees by the faulty system of command relationships he instituted for the Union armies in the east. Grant could have significantly improved the prospects of success for the Army of the James if he had provided Butler with a more able subordinate than Smith--Sedgwick would have been an excellent choice. The question of effective command relationships cannot be separated from that of personalities. The most serious problem was Grant's failure to clearly establish Meade's role and responsibilities, resulting in a sort of dual command situation in the Army of the Potomac. Meade would almost certainly have functioned better if Grant had clarified his role at the very start of the campaign, and had used him consistently in that role throughout the campaign that followed. Retaining Meade in command may also have been a mistake, judging from his performance at Cold Harbor, and especially at Petersburg.<sup>33</sup> It would have made more sense for Grant to have simply taken command of the Army of the Potomac from the very beginning, and to have used Meade as a deputy

commander or chief of staff. This would have removed much of the friction between Meade and Sheridan that led Grant to his unfortunate decision to send Sheridan on his raid before the potentially decisive Spotsylvania Operation. The question of reporting relationships for Burnside's IX Corps would never have developed under these circumstances.

Since Grant repeatedly took tactical control of the army during the early part of the campaign, he could have avoided the resulting confusion by formally taking command of the army. Wilson, however, believed that Grant's personal staff was not organized to supervise or direct military operations, but rather was organized merely to gather information and make order.<sup>34</sup> Merely relieving Meade would not have solved the entire problem. Had Grant managed to properly assign his key subordinates and clearly define their roles and responsibility relationships in the very beginning of the campaign, it would have eliminated or reduced the impact of several of the key mistakes that prevented him from winning a decisive strategic victory and ending the Civil War in the summer of 1864.

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5. Edward Steere, The Wilderness Campaign (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), p. 22.
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Fuller, J.F.C. Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957. This is a highly argumentative work. Its purpose seems to have been to challenge the common judgement that Lee was the epitome of military genius, while Grant was nothing more than a butcher. He treats Lee quite roughly, in contrast to his high praise of Grant. The lack of balance undermines the credibility of the book.

Grant, Ulysses S. Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1952. This account was disappointingly brief, and did not go into the detail that one might have hoped. It was, however, quite useful in understanding his commander's intent. Grant fully discussed his strategy and the reasoning behind it in most instances. He included the full text of several of his key reports to Washington during the campaign, which were quite helpful. Grant was less than completely candid on the episode of Sheridan's Cavalry Raid. He did not engage in much self-criticism, perhaps reasoning that numerous others were already criticizing him. He obviously felt that he was being treated unfairly by the press, which he believed was "free to the point of open treason" (page 453), and by those who credited his victory only to his unimaginative and bloody use of an overwhelming numerical superiority. Grant's memoirs are essential to reaching a full understanding of the campaign, whatever their limitations may be.

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campaign, in many cases virtually dictating strategy options for the Union, and Huston's account deals with these sustainment issues that have frequently been given only superficial treatment by historians.

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address the effect of the absence of all the cavalry from Spotsylvania, although he did stress the tremendous morale impact of the victory at Yellow Tavern on the long-suffering Union cavalry arm.

Steere, Edward. The Wilderness Campaign. New York: Bonanza Books, 1960. Steere has written the definitive book on the Wilderness. He went to great lengths to accurately track the individual units and the events of the battle by weighing the frequently confusing and sometimes conflicting primary source material. He provides detailed analysis of the campaign throughout the book, and argues his points convincingly. Steere concluded that the sort of "dual command" system of the Union forces caused confusion and a duplication of effort among the respective staff of Grant and Meade.

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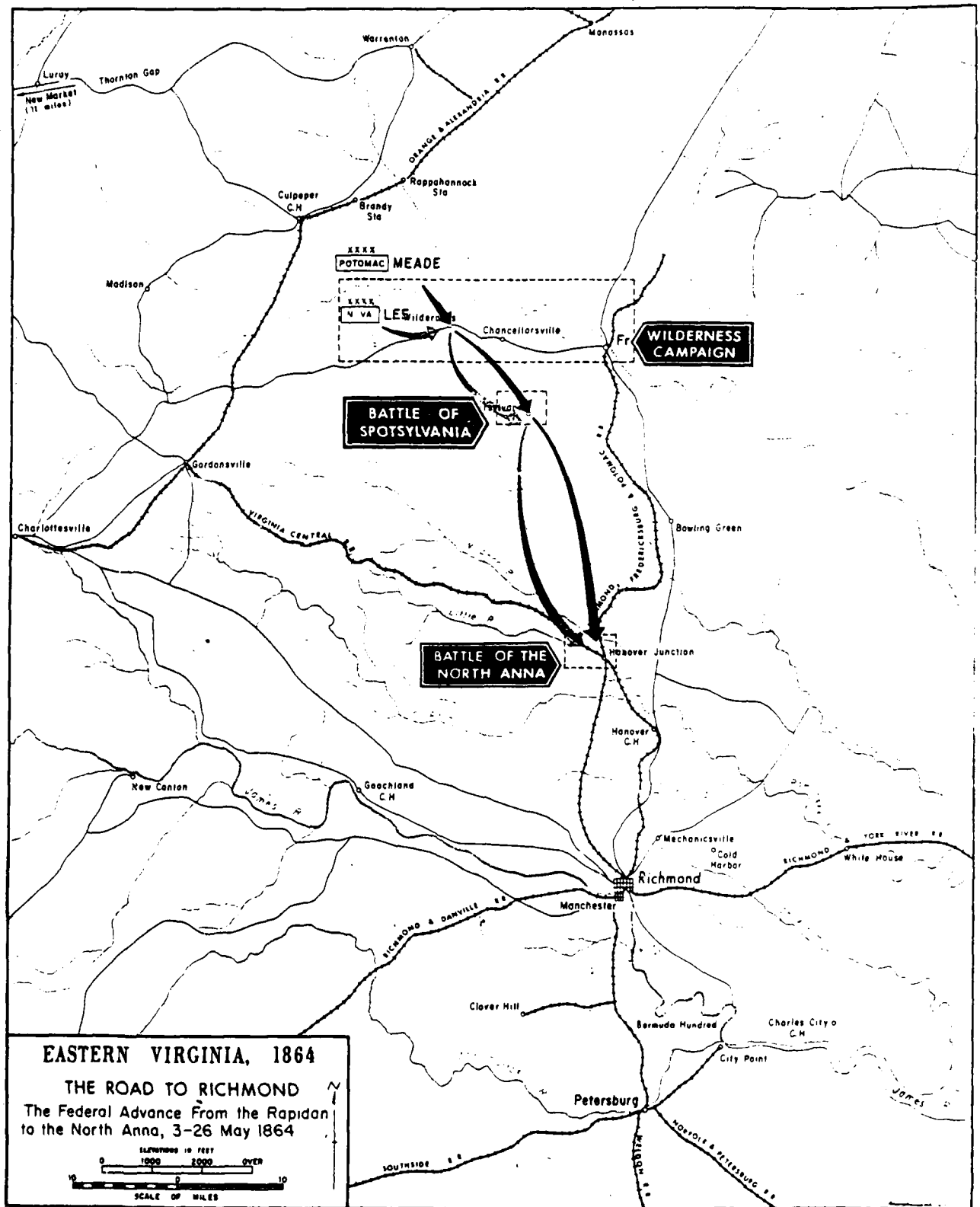
Williams, T. Harry. Lincoln and His Generals. New York: Knopf, 1952. Williams places his focus on political

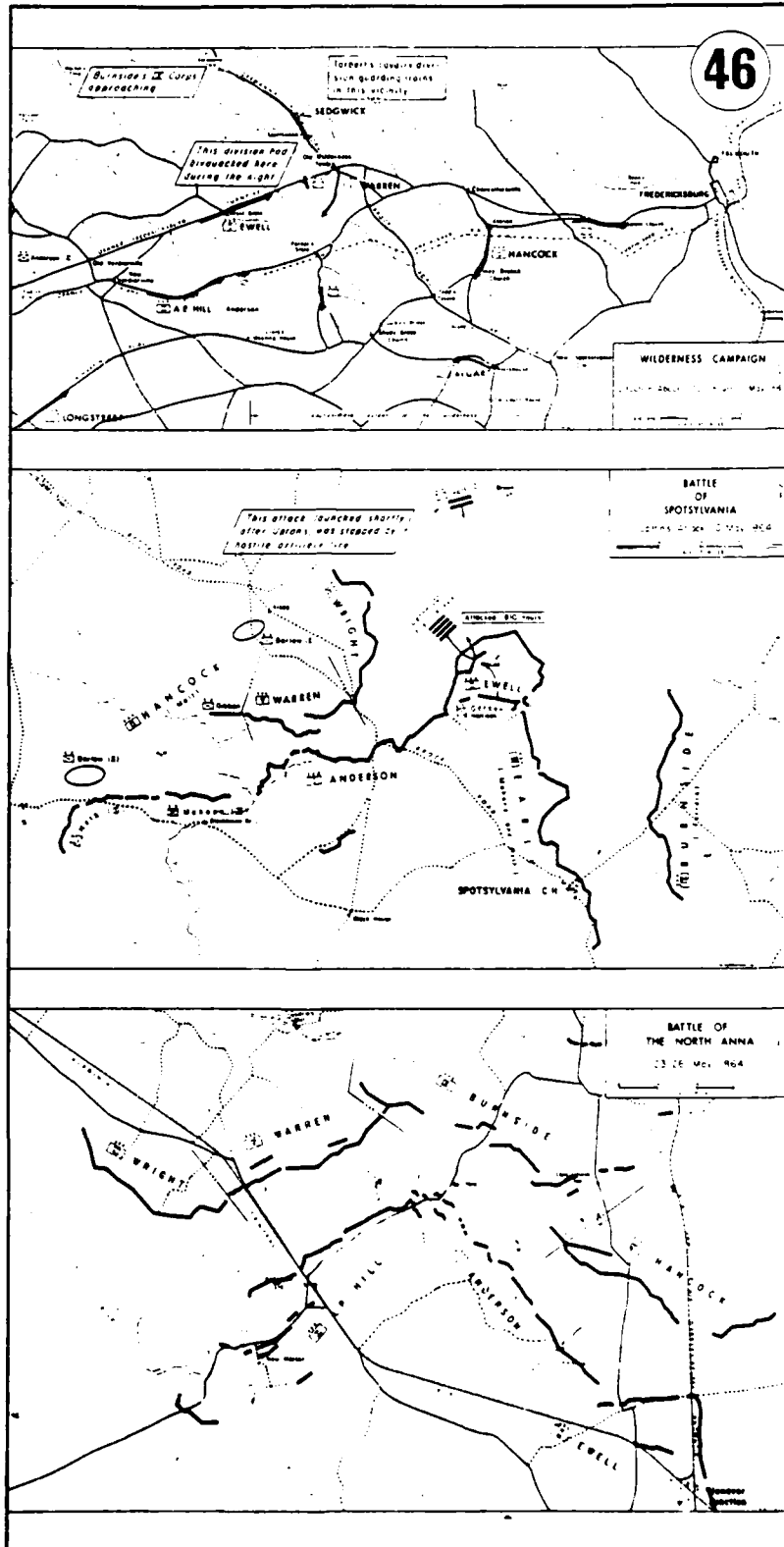
issues and the relationship between Lincoln and his senior military leadership. It does not offer any tactical analysis of the campaign, but does analyze the overall campaign plan. It explains Lincoln's electoral problems and the necessity for the appointment of political generals such as Butler, Banks, and Sigel, despite their collective lack of military ability. Williams holds Grant in the highest regard, considering him to have been the greatest general of the Civil War, when judged by modern standards.

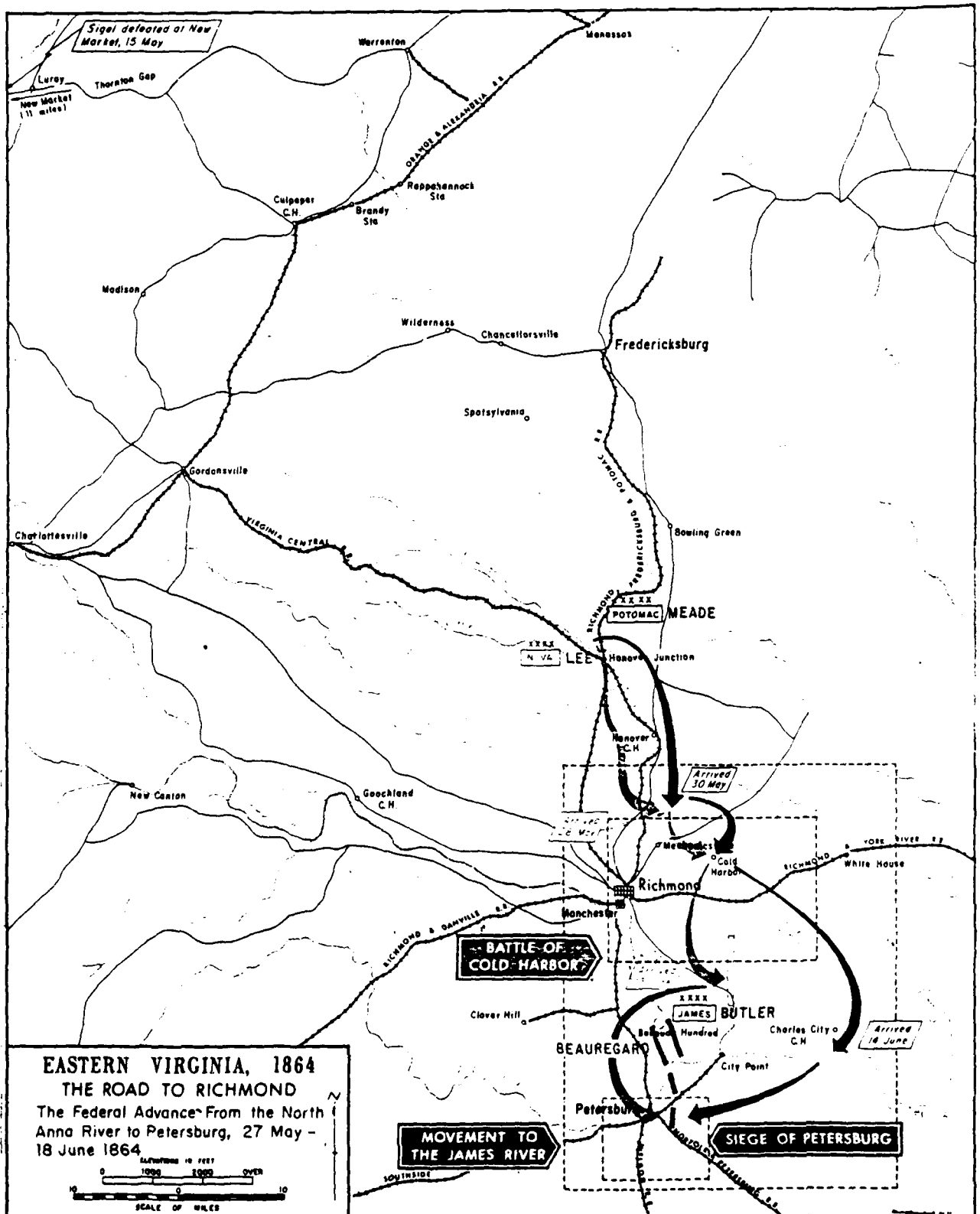
Wilson, James Harrison. Under the Old Flag. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1912. Wilson was one of the officers Grant brought with him from the west. He provided insight into the intrigue that he and Sheridan engaged in against Butler in late May. They helped to convince Grant that Butler was accomplishing little with his forces, and that substantial forces should be pulled from the Army of the James to reinforce the Army of the Potomac.

## MAPS

The following maps were designed by Gerald P. Stadler and Arthur V. Grant, Jr., and were drafted by Edward J. Krasnoborski and George W. Giddings. They were reproduced from the Campaign Atlas to the American Civil War, published by the United States Military Academy in 1978, and revised in 1980.











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